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"Places Where a Thought Might Grow": The Historical Context of the Poetry of Derek Mahon

by

Patricia King

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1995

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This Manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

13 September 1995 — Date
Catherine Stimpson — Chair of Examining Committee

15 September 1995 — Date
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

"Places Where a Thought Might Grow":
The Historical Context of the Poetry
of Derek Mahon

by

Patricia King

Advisor: Professor Catherine McKenna

This dissertation examines the poetry of Derek Mahon as it relates to the historical background of contemporary Northern Ireland. My reading of Mahon's work explores the tension between text and context, the contested juncture between the private space of the poem on the page and the public space of political conflict.

Chapter 1 charts Mahon's relation to his home place and the manner in which his growth as a poet coincides with his affirmation of places like Derry and Belfast as integral parts of the Irish literary landscape. Chapter 2 focuses on Mahon's questioning of the Northern poets' place in the Irish literary tradition, while chapter 3 studies the complexity of the Irish poets' relation to the English literary tradition.

The conclusion locates Mahon as an exemplary figure of the poet in a troubled time, sustaining a balance between poetry as an expression of the Yeatsian "lonely impulse of delight" and poetry as the cry of a people's pain.

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Introduction

At the beginning of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen describes Irish art as "the cracked looking glass of a servant." Joyce wrote those bitter words in the context of the Irish Literary Revival, aware that in spite of the masterful efforts of William Butler Yeats to conjure up a unity of culture, Irish art continued to reflect its colonized and servile condition. Yeats's years of service and his imperious cultural program failed to establish a firm sense of an Irish literary tradition. His own work is generally absorbed by the academy into British literature, as has been that of most Irish writers since his death.

The partitioning of Ireland in 1922 contributed to the sense of cultural fragmentation and reinforced the aptness of the "cracked looking glass" image as a reflection of the shattered state of Irish self-esteem. While Partition effected all of Ireland culturally, the fissures were most visible in the North. Carving off six counties from the rest of the country exacerbated the Northern Unionists attitude of provincial servility towards "mainland" English culture, as well as their paralyzed incapacity to assert a separate cultural identity of their own. On the part of the Nationalist minority in the North, partition aggravated a sense of

inferiority stemming from their political situation as second class citizens, compounded by the servility generated by the authoritarian dominance of the Catholic Church in their lives. Inevitably these cultural fissures have had an effect on writers.

Denis Donoghue, in his book *We Irish*, notes this dilemma: "The Irish writers find it peculiarly difficult to know what they are doing: they live upon a fractured rather than an integral tradition." (146) Donoghue attributes this fracture to the events of Irish history and considers that these conditions, if construed as a provocation, can actually be good for literature, and certainly proved so for Joyce and Yeats. Donoghue advocates an imaginative grappling with the matter of Irish history:

> It is sometimes said that Ireland's memory is too long and too ardent, that we should try the experiment of forgetting ourselves. But it is poor advice. For a small country, Ireland has had a lot of experience, many chances if fewer choices. The best writers in Ireland are those who remember most: I do not mean the oldest writers, necessarily, I mean those who feel immediate experience not merely in itself but in relation to a long perspective. (146-147)

Contemporary poets from the North of Ireland are engaged in a creative wrestling between the need to assert the freedom of the lyric voice, and the demands of Irish history. Poets such as John Montague, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Mahon certainly exhibit Donoghue's sense of "the long perspective", and their poetry has benefited.

Since the mid-sixties Northern Ireland has enjoyed a continuous surge of creative energy. At the outset this was most evident in the area of poetry, but, in the intervening years, the visual arts have produced fine work by artists including Gerard Dillon, Colin Middleton, and Basil Blackshaw. Theatre is flourishing, with the life-work of Mary O'Malley coming to fruition in the refurbished Lyric Theatre in Belfast, and the work of the actor Stephen Rea and playwright Brian Friel directing the development of the enormously successful Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. *The Honest Ulsterman*, founded by the poet James Simmons in the sixties, has dropped its trendy claims of being "a handbook for revolution," and, under the direction of a succession of fine writers like the poet Frank Ormsby (who also edited the ground-breaking anthology *Poets From the North of Ireland* in 1979), has become, along with *Fortnight* and *The Linenhall Review*, a valuable part of the cultural buzz in the North.

An Ulster-centered cultural debate has developed in which the leading figures are Seamus Deane and Edna Longley. Once again, as in the case of the revival led by Yeats at the beginning of the century, this cultural engagement coincides with a political struggle; the unresolved question being battled out in Northern Ireland, both politically and culturally, is one of place: Irish or British, or some form imaginable which can make room for a creative coexistence of both?

My dissertation studies the work of Derek Mahon as an example of all these complex strands of cultural identity held in creative tension. The political context has provided Mahon and his fellow poets with a field of force and a provocation to poetry; the poetry in its turn gives significant form to the energies stirring beneath the surface in contemporary Irish history. Derek Mahon feels very keenly what T. S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," calls sense of "the pastness of the past and of its presence" (49); this historical sense is "what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity." (50)

I feel that from their particular vantage point in place and time, contemporary Ulster poets such as Mahon are re-interpreting the past, and in so doing are altering our sense of who the important writers in the Irish tradition might be. As well as Yeats and Joyce,

Northern writers such as Louis MacNeice, Patrick Kavanagh and John Hewitt become important figures for contemporary Northern poets. Eliot's insight that the past is "altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (50) is shown to have particular relevance in the Northern situation, and even to sound a note of hope, at least in the cultural domain.

In the context of the political situation in contemporary Northern Ireland, the relation of the Irish Literary Revival writers to the historical situation of their time comes under renewed scrutiny. This reexamination coincides with a revisionist attempt, underway in academic circles, to reassess the implications of the Irish Literary Revival, and the value of the Irish struggle for independence. This revisionist movement, led by Conor Cruise O'Brien, and motivated, perhaps, by revulsion at the violence which has continued to erupt in Ireland, sees the Rising of 1916 as unnecessary, and Yeats's poem about that event as a dangerous incitement to violence, in its glorification of heroic struggle.

Against this background the voice of the poet provides a counter-statement. In Ireland the poet has traditionally held a central role as the sanctioned chronicler of the past; the Irish bards and *filidh* had free and untrammeled passage across tribal boundaries throughout the country. In the context of domination and

division, with the official history books often reflecting vested interests, the Irish poet retains his power as the preserver and construer of tradition.

Paul Muldoon's collection *Meeting The British* provides a recent example of the poet reimagining the past in the light of the present climate of questioning and turmoil. In the last poem in that collection, "7, Middagh Street," W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice share a house in Brooklyn where, *inter alia*, the two friends present their differing versions of Yeats's role in the Easter Rising. Auden, reiterating the point of view stated in his elegy for Yeats that "poetry makes nothing happen," adds:

> As for his crass, rhetorical
> posturing, `Did that play of mine
> send out certain men (*certain* men?)
>
> the English shot...?
> the answer is `certainly not'.
>
> If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead
> would certain men have stayed in bed?

For history's a twisted root
with art its small translucent fruit

and never the other way round.
(*Meeting The British* 39)

MacNeice, in the "Louis" section of the poem, describes his position as being closer to the "every thing you do matters" of their mutual friend Delmore Schwartz: "the displacement of soap-suds in a basin/may have some repercussion/for a distant ship" (57). MacNeice recounts a dream of being incinerated by Unionist bigots who call him a traitor, and then intertextually echoing Yeats, he continues:

In dreams begin responsibilities;
it was on account of just such an allegory
that Lorca
was riddled with bullets
and lay mouth down
in the fickle shadow of his own blood
As the drunken soldiers of the *Gypsy Ballads*
started back for town
. . . . . .

For poetry *can* make things happen--
not only can but *must*-- (58)

Derek Mahon does not address the issue of poetry's political efficacy in the oblique fashion of Muldoon; his way is to write from the perspective of his own existential imagination and avoid polemic. But, in pursuing Yeats's instruction "Irish poets learn your trade"("Under Ben Bulben" 327), Mahon apprentices to Louis MacNeice and Samuel Beckett, as readily as to Yeats. This affinity is due to what Mahon, quoting Wallace Stevens, calls a shared sensibility:

> 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*.' (*Selected Prose* 48)

The central focus of this dissertation is how Mahon's poetry envisions the turmoil and tragic shambles of contemporary Ireland. It concentrates on a reading of his poetry as exemplary in its imaginative integrity. Mahon's response to the historical crisis of his time is one of honest and tense engagement; the tone of the poetry is tentative, nevertheless with the exploratory sureness of a divining rod, responding to the pull of his poetic vision. I feel that my reading of his poetry will reveal an open-endedness, and a radical questioning of what a harmonious Irish tradition might be, leaving the

reader with a sense that it is something we have yet to create. In trying poetically to repossess the past and recompose the present, Mahon's poetry discloses imaginatively a glimpse of a possible Ireland of the future, for now only an Ireland of the mind, embodied in poetic form.

My dissertation is divided into three chapters: the first examines the manner in which Mahon's poetic emergence reflects his growing awareness of the troubles that beset his native North, the second explores Mahon's finding his own poetic voice, and his questioning of his place in the Irish literary tradition, while the third concentrates on the complexity of the Irish poets' relation to the English literary tradition.

The critical spirit in which I pursue my inquiry into the intersection of history and poetry in Mahon's work resembles that described by the critic Kenneth Burke in *Counter-Statement:*

> The artist as artist is not generally concerned with specific political issues. He usually deals with the attitudes, the emphasis, in which the choice of some one political or economic policy is implicit, but he need not--as artist--follow the matter through to the full extent. He may sing of pastoral moments on the shores of the Mississippi, nothing more; but if

> the things he extols there are found to be endangered by growth of chain stores, his purely pastoral concerns involve by implication the backing of an anti-chain store candidate for President. Thus a system of aesthetic subsumes a system of politics (and though the artist--qua artist--may ignore it, the present program of critical orientation cannot ignore it). (146)

The Northern Irish poets, in attempting to encompass the reality of what is happening in their home place and its significance within the structures of their poetry, look outside their own situation to their counterparts in other cultures: Albert Camus and his relation to the Algerian struggle; Czeslaw Milosz in relation to Poland, Anton Chekhov and Osip Mandelshtam at their different moments in Russia, and Yeats in Ireland. All are exemplary of the tensions generated by the relation between politics and the creative writer, and are the history lessons from which contemporary Irish poets such as Mahon try to learn.

Poetry contains words about the world, and so there must be concern for tact and tone, but poetry is more than words about the world. The poem creates an alternative world. In the well known words of Yeats, "The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,/ the sentimentalist himself; while art/Is but a vision of

reality." In a May 1985 interview with this writer Mahon quoted those lines from Yeats's poem "*Ego Dominus Tuus*" to express his feelings about how poetry relates to reality. History for Mahon as for Yeats, is always felt history, mediated by the blind, stupefied heart, sifted and shaped by the inner vision of the poet.

Mahon's poetry contains a lyric response to a recent history in which the actual four provinces of Ireland provide little terrain for hope. Poets from Northern Ireland are aware of being surrounded by what Heaney calls the "ministry of fear." For twenty-five years a war has been waged--a struggle for power and control, stalled in its outcome, with the present fragile cease-fire leaving an opening for the possibility of peace. The poet's response to the relentless violence has been to conjure up a fifth province of the imagination, a center for what John Montague calls "courteous exchange," a home for the dialogic imagination where all are encouraged, in Louis MacNeice's phrase, to be "incorrigibly plural" and to explore the many-faceted nature of Irishness as expressed in art. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson states: "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuiness, but by the style in which they are imagined." (6) By these standards, contemporary Northern poetry creates a genuine community where poems are addressed to other poets, engaging them in a shared pursuit of a harmonious center

of gravity. There is a recognition that no unity is possible without a basic disposition towards the affirmation of otherness. The particularity and variousness of the strands that form the intricate tapestry of Irish cultural identity are all tangled and frayed in our everyday Ireland. The poet's effort is to retrace the patterns and piece together the fragments to form, what Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* called a new "collideoscope," which replaces violent conflict with playful colloquies.

In the last sentence of *Permanence and Change,* Kenneth Burke admonishes us that "men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious at the edge of an abyss." This is a good description of the posture of Northern Irish poetry. The loquaciousness is not escapist or exclusive; the poet confronts the realities of the situation and aims at a most inclusive colloquy about the place of poetry, aware that his dilemma is shared by other poets in other places, similarly faced with the implications of commitment to lyric poetry.

This dialogic relation has evolved over the past twenty-five troubled years in Ireland; a significant number of poems are written "for" another poet, or even framed in the form of a letter. Remarking on this intertextuality, the critic Edna Longley extends its reach even to the level of the unconscious:

> Poems can ignore each other and yet be in touch. Because of the themes that go with the territory, and the territory that goes with the themes, they participate in a shifting stream of aesthetic and cultural relations. Here lyric poetry, often damned as upholding the egotistical sublime, clearly subscribes to a dispersed collectivity. (*The Living Stream* 51)

This communal sensibility assumes particular significance against the background of the strife and terrifying polarization in Northern Ireland. As William Butler Yeats has said, "We cannot know truth but we can embody it" (*Explorations 184*). In contemporary Ireland, while no one seems to know the true solution to the strife, a symbolic resolution is being embodied poetically in the dialogic lyrics of Irish poets encouraging and celebrating the difference and incorrigible plurality of each other's visions of reality. Poems become sites where in the words of the cultural critic Homi Bhabha "Newness enters the world". Mahon's poetry enacts this ongoing transformative change which Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*:

> What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently,* "opening out", remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a

> singular or autonomous sign of difference--be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences--where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in between*--find their agency in a form of the "future" where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present. (219)

In a recent interview, the literary critic Lucy McDiarmid, questioning the efficacy of poetry, asked Derek Mahon "Does it do any good?" Mahon answered by quoting Shelley's statement in *A Defence of Poetry*: "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause" (*Irish Literary Supplement* Fall 1991: 27). The effect of the political situation in Northern Ireland has been violence, bloodshed and extreme polarization. Poets such as Mahon imaginatively create alternative perspectives, which will, given the time, change people's attitudes and thus "administer to the cause."

Chapter One

"What Lies in the Future Tense"

In his essay on reality and the imagination, *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens remarks that the true history of the human race is a history of its progressive mental states (6); it is in this sense that the poetry of Derek Mahon relates the history of his time. In it we find imaginative responses to the events and circumstances of life. The poems associated with the history of Mahon's home place, contemporary Ulster, are particularly interesting for the purposes of this study.

Mahon's early poem "Glengormley" opens with a satiric juxtaposition of the Greek epigraph with the shrunken stature of contemporary human life in the suburb of Belfast where his parents live:

> `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.

With these lines Mahon sets the stage for an ironic description of his home place. He also sets the tone for much of his early poetry. "Glengormley' was written in 1962, before the troubles erupted again in Northern Ireland. For this reason, read in the light of subsequent events, the poem has a further historical irony:

> 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 which once broke bones will not now harm
> A generation of such sense and charm.
>
> Only words hurt us now. No saint or hero,
> landing at night from the conspiring seas,
> Brings dangerous tokens of the new era--
> Their sad names linger in the histories.
> The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain,
> Dangle from 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 by choice, I live here too. (*Selected Poems* 12)

The discreet charm of the Belfast bourgeoisie of the early 1960's is set against the turbulent myth and history of the past: the Protestant suburb of Glengormley, with its brand new subsidy bungalows, seems safe now from all invasions - either from the giant Finn Mac Cumhaill, the saint Patrick, the Vikings in their "long ships," or Roger Casement.

Roger Casement, a hero to Mahon, would be considered a disloyal traitor in a place like Glengormley. Born into a Protestant family in Ballymena, Co. Antrim, Sir Roger Casement distinguished himself in the British Foreign Service and subsequently defected to the Irish Republican struggle to win independence from England. Casement sought arms in Germany to help in the 1916 Rising, and was captured when he tried to land these arms on Irish shores. Casement was executed for his part in the Rising, and was celebrated in Yeats's poem "The Ghost of Roger Casement":

O what has made that sudden noise?
What on the threshold stands?
It never crossed the sea because
John Bull and the sea are friends;
But this is not the old sea
Nor this the old seashore.

What gave that roar of mockery,
That roar in the sea's roar?

The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating at the door.
(*Collected Poems* 306)

Though he had landed at night from a German submarine at Banna strand in County Kerry in the south of Ireland, not anywhere near the northern Glengormley, the myth persisted in the popular consciousness that invasion of the North was imminent, as evidenced by the reminiscences of Louis MacNeice in *Autumn Journal*:

And I remember, when I was little, the fear
Bandied among the servants
That Casement would land at the pier
With a sword and a horde of rebels (XV1:18-22)

The prospect of invasion from the "the conspiring seas" proffering relief from the banal tedium of suburban life in Belfast in the early sixties, before war broke out again, fired the imagination of the young Mahon. This enthusiastic response, like the act of writing poetry, sets Mahon apart from his community and creates an affinity with fellow renegades like Roger Casement. These mythological and historical associations of his natal place are essential nourishment for his imagination, while the antiseptic new housing estates appeal only to his satiric sense.

The move to Glengormley did not take place until Mahon was almost twenty, so the poem marks a departure, a move further away from the city's nerve center, and the working-class neighborhood of his childhood, with its Victorian brick terraces, where the women worked in the linen mills and the males of his family were employed in the shipyards or on the long Cunard liners. Derek Mahon's father worked for the shipbuilding company Harland and Wolff, as his father had done before him (one grandfather helped build the *Titanic*); Mahon's mother worked for the old York Street Flax Spinning Company.

A post war slump in shipbuilding, the near collapse of the linen industry, combined with the move to the suburbs, separates his "generation of such sense and charm" from a vital part of its domestic and maritime past. The line "the long ships lie in clover" refers not

only to the long boats of the invading Vikings but also to the long ships formerly built in Belfast. The move to these bland bungalows is the launch of "a new era" in which the imaginatively rich untidy past of giants, saints and heroes will be left behind like old furniture. Only " their sad names linger in the histories." Mahon's attachment to the Belfast of his childhood resonates in a "residual poetry of/ Leave-taking and home-coming"("Going Home"); Belfast provides the exemplary cityscape for his poetry, a palimpsest which both reveals and conceals layers of metaphysical pain of both its past and present lives.

History figures as a suppressed past in "Glengormley"; the poet is left with the choice of making this "worldly time under this worldly sky" the subject of his poetry, or aligning himself with "the unreconciled" who, like the poet Gerard De Nerval, succumb to suicide and in their "metaphysical pain/Dangle from lamp-posts in the dawn rain."

"The unreconciled" also alludes to the teachings of existentialism, which had captured Mahon's imagination at the time he wrote this poem, while studying philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. Albert Camus, for whose thinking he felt a particular affinity (an affinity he explores at length in a later poem "Death and the Sun"), begins *Le Mythe de Sysiphe* with a meditation on suicide and on the mental state of being unreconciled to the absurdity of

contemporary reality. Conor Cruise O'Brien (much admired in Dublin student circles at the time) points out in *Camus*, his brilliant brief study of the philosopher's work, that for Camus the strength of the absurd hero lies not in suicide, but in acceptance of the absurd task of living; real revolt consists in living unreconciled (33). From this we may be able to surmise that Mahon's mental state in "Glengormley" combines elements of social and metaphysical revolt. By the poem's conclusion Mahon has accepted as his poetic fate, to celebrate in ironic fashion the bleak reductiveness of his place and time. He accepts, however unwillingly, as a kind of Sysiphian stone, the bond with his people expressed in the "we" of the poem, and concludes: "by/Necessity, if not choice, I live here too." The force of poetic necessity which binds the poet to the life of his people and the tensions created by his equal if not greater need to affirm his independence are recurrent motifs in Derek Mahon's poetry. The local history of his place and his changing relations to it form an important *topos* of the early poems.

Born in Belfast in 1941, Mahon's earliest memories are of that city during the second world war. If Dillon Johnston's calculations in his study *Irish Poetry After Joyce* are correct, Derek Mahon was conceived "during the first Nazi bombings of Belfast" or perhaps in an "All Clear" (224). Mahon's poem *The Home Front* in

Autobiographies, describes having his life intimately linked to the events of history from its beginning:

> While the frozen armies trembled
> At the gates of Stalingrad
> They took me home in a taxi
> And laid me in my cot,
> And there I slept again
> With siren and blackout;
>
> 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.
>
> But I do remember one time
> (I must have been four then)
> Being held up to the window
> For a victory parade-
> .....
> a male child in a garden
> Clutching *The Empire News*
> *(Selected Poems* 85)

As a child Derek Mahon lived off the Antrim Road, in post partition, post-war Belfast. He attended Skegoneill Primary school and grew up in a segregated society, the Unionist part of which clung onto the union with England, and the corresponding assurance of being part of the British Empire, as tightly as that child in the garden had clutched *The Empire News*. Mahon sang in the choir of the local Church of Ireland, St. Peter's on the Antrim Road, for seven years, and was poetically and spiritually influenced by the language of The Church Hymnal, The Book of Common Prayer, and the King James Version of the Bible. Michael Longley, a fellow poet from Belfast, describes growing up in this colonial culture of sectarian apartheid:

> At primary school (and later at grammar school) there was next to nothing on the curriculum to suggest that we were living on the island of Ireland and the province of Ulster: little or no Irish history except when it impinged on the grand parade of English monarchs; little or no Irish literature; no Irish art; no Irish music. When we sang in music classes we mouthed English songs. One inspector criticized our accents and forced us to sing "each with his bonny laws, A-dauncing on the grawss"... In the late fifties and early sixties when I attended Trinity College Dublin the two parts of Ireland

> were studiously incurious about each other. And it was the time of the Ban. The Catholic Church decreed that it was a mortal sin for Catholics to enroll at Trinity... I didn't get to know [Catholics] until I returned to Belfast to teach. Poetry brought together a number of us in a way that denied sect and class. It now seems quite extraordinary that I was twenty-three before I could count Northern Irish Catholics among my close friends. (*Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland* 33)

Derek Mahon and Michael Longley attended the same secondary school--the Belfast Academical Institution, popularly known as "Inst." In "My Protestant Education," an article written in 1974 for the *New Statesman*, Longley emphasizes the Belfast Academical Institution's ties to the radical tradition in Northern Irish Protestantism:

> The grammar school I moved on to had enjoyed a radical reputation in the nineteenth century, and it remained a tolerant and pleasantly secular place. There I encountered that tough skepticism and disenchanted liberalism with which many educated and moderate Protestants who cannot accept either Nationalism or diehard Unionism fill the vacuum (219).

Michael Longley, Mahon's fellow Instonian, being the older by two years, finished and went on to university at Trinity College Dublin. Mahon stayed on into the upper sixth, which he describes in an interview with William Scammell in the Summer 1991 issue of *Poetry Review* as "a special university scholarship class taught by J. W. Boyle, a Dublin man who prepared us for Trinity"(4). This class with John Boyle introduced Mahon for the first time to the poetry of his fellow Irishman William Butler Yeats and to the Republican and Socialist heritage of Belfast. John Boyle's teaching had a lasting influence on Mahon. Boyle introduced his pupils to the cultural life of the city, bringing them to plays at the Lyric Theatre, and introducing them to such landmarks of popular culture and literate conversation as Lavery's back bar.

Both Derek Mahon and Michael Longley were at this time beneficiaries of the 1947 Butler Education Act. Up until that time only the moneyed classes in the North were usually educated past primary school level, now, as part of a post World War II social program it became possible for working-class people and the rural poor to have access to higher education. Provided one did well enough on the O level exams, one could get into a good secondary school. Following that, if one passed the A levels with enough honours, one could attend University.

This act had a revolutionary effect in the province

of Ulster, though that was hardly part of the British government's agenda. Not only bright Protestants like Mahon and Longley benefited from this act, but also bright young people from the Catholic community -- future poets and scholars like Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, and Paul Muldoon, and future political activists like Eamon Mc Cann, Bernadette Devlin, and John Hume. This act, by making free education available to all who were bright enough to qualify, can be credited with helping to bring about the cultural renaissance which has taken place in Northern Ireland since the midsixties, about the time when the first beneficiaries of the act were finishing University.

One could, of course, be cynical and say that the 1947 education act was a safety valve rather than a time bomb, channeling disaffected young people toward the pen rather than the gun as a means of achieving a just society. In Catholic ghettos like the Bogside in Derry there was immediate recognition that this act would bring about radical change. It would mark the end of the *status quo*: articulate, educated Catholics would no longer tolerate being denied civil rights and treated like second-class citizens in the state. Bright young people from the Catholic community could become the salvation of their community by excelling in the entrance exams. Among these would be the future leaders of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement. The not so

bright, or those whose temperament or home circumstances did not allow them to take this intellectual route to liberation, often became the casualties of an educational system where the punitive practices reinforced a cyclical sense of outrage and physical force.

In his poem "Anseo," Paul Muldoon seems to suggest that such a system could turn the less bright or less intellectually motivated into recruits for the Provisional IRA, where the cycle of fascist authority and physical force would be perpetuated; their frustration at being excluded from the charmed circle of scholarship boys and teachers' pets motivating them to direct their inarticulate rage to explosive action, and their deep need for recognition and respect moving them to create little hedge schools in the hills where the lesson of the day is military rather than scholarly:

Anseo

When the Master was calling the roll
At the primary school in Collegelands,
You were meant to call back *Anseo*
And raise your hand
as your name occurred.
Anseo, meaning here, here and now,
All present and correct,
Was the first word of Irish I spoke.

The last name in the ledger
Belonged to Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward
And was followed, as often as not,
By silence, knowing looks,
A nod and a wink, the Master's droll
"And where's our little Ward-of-court?"

I remember the first time he came back
The master had sent him out
Along the hedges
To weigh up for himself and cut
A stick with which he would be beaten.
After a while, nothing was spoken;
He would arrive as a matter of course
With an ash-plant, a salley-rod.
Or, finally, the hazel-wand
He had whittled down to a whip-lash,
Its twist of red and yellow lacquers
Sanded and polished.
And altogether so delicately wrought
that he had engraved his initials on it.

I last met Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward
In a pub just over the Irish border.
He was living in the open,
In a secret camp
On the other side of the mountain.

He was fighting for Ireland,
Making things happen.
And he told me, Joe Ward,
Of how he had risen in the ranks
To Quartermaster, Commandant:
How every morning at parade
His volunteers would call back *Anseo*
And raise their hands
As their names occurred
(Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 20).

"Anseo" is an example of how poets like Mahon and Muldoon register in the oblique language of poetry the historical and cultural conditions of their place and time. By giving the unfortunate victim of physical force in the classroom, who then goes on perpetuating the abusive cycle in his role of Commandant, the name of Joseph Mary Plunkett, perhaps the worst poet of the literary revival, who was later executed for his part in the Easter Rising, Muldoon combines subtle humor with social comment.

From the outset Derek Mahon resisted the role of the poet as the voice of his people; the pressures he felt as a Northern Protestant situated him in an emotional impasse. In an environment where one is surrounded by slogans urging "remember," and where there is an oppressive sense of siege, it is difficult not to seek

some escape. Having left Belfast to attend Trinity College Dublin, Mahon found that his visits home entailed confrontations with the ruling culture and its expectations. In "The Spring Vacation," dedicated to Michael Longley, he expresses the sense of collusion which overtakes him on his return home:

> 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.
> (*Selected Poems* 4)

The act of writing poetry, for Mahon as for Longley, is a way of both articulating and resolving a social dilemma. The poem is an exposure both of the nature of society's tacit demands on "its own," and of the tensions between communal fidelities and loyalty to the poetic self. "The Spring Vacation" contains the struggle between these fidelities. As for the young Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, so for the persona of Mahon's poem, the cry *Non Serviam* has great poetic appeal:

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 hidden menace 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.
(*Poems* 1962-1978 4)

There is no innocent vacation back at home possible for a northern poet like Mahon. Going home implies a return to complicity with an unjust society. Each return is an act of remembering, of becoming conscious of himself again as a member of that community. What he must not forget, from the point of view of his community, is that he is one of them, with all the tribal allegiance that that implies. From his own point of view, what he must not forget, in the elation of being on spring vacation, walking among his own "in a tide of sunlight," is the distance he, as an artist, must keep from "the unwieldy images of the squinting heart." The narrow squinting outlook of some, among his people, is something with which the poet can so

easily find himself resuming his old conspiracy, and falling into step.

In the second stanza of "The Spring Vacation," our attention is drawn to a wider aspect of the Belfast heritage which justifies Mahon's deep poetic attraction to his home place: "we could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill/At the top of every street." This is a Biblical reference to Psalm 121: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills/from whence cometh my help." True salvation lies in relinquishing the squinting fixed stare at the narrow ground and elevating the heart and eyes to the numinous possibility of the hills so close at hand "at the top of every street." This possible salvation is nonsectarian, open and visible to all, whether the individual street be Protestant or Catholic.

Besides the figurative hills of the psalm, the hill actually visible at the top of every Belfast street is Cave Hill, the site, according to local history, of Mac Art's Fort, and also the site of a famous open-air meeting of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, in preparation for the 1798 rising. The poet sees the hill as the locus of the link with the Gaelic past, and with the Protestant libertarian heritage of Ulster men like Thomas Russell and Henry Joy McCracken. These men who held their meeting on the hill above Belfast hold out a hope of a possible salvation open to all even in the midst of the current sectarian strife in Belfast. By

lifting his eyes to Cave Hill Mahon can remember a part of his Northern Protestant heritage with which he can claim solidarity; that is the crucial role played by Protestants from the north in Irish history as noted in Thomas Davis' popular "Song of the Volunteers":

> The North began; the north held on
> The strife for native land
> Till Ireland rose, and cow'd her foes-
> God bless the Northern land.

However the poet notes that the predominant point of view of his home place at present excludes this pluralistic vision of the Northern past. And yet the hill remains "Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible," a proffered symbol of hope. Meanwhile it's business as usual in the mean streets of the sectarian enclaves. The poem rehearses the everyday characteristics of the darker side of this lifestyle: "the hidden menace in the knowing nod," the "sullen silence in light and shade," a salvation that consists in astute observance of a sanctimonious set of exclusionary rituals, like those of the Orange Lodges and their totemic marches, all carried out accompanied by the comic relief of the "humorous formulae."

The poet notes a sympathy with the socio-historic predicament of the Ulster Protestant, and the resultant siege mentality, which produces this rough banter and

this harsh outlook. This close-minded mentality is by no means an exclusive attribute of the Protestant sections of Belfast. In an essay on the Belfast-born novelist Brian Moore, Derek Mahon comments on the pervasive "hatred, ignorance and suspicion," which, in the fifties, when Brian Moore began to write *The Feast of Lupercal* and *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, poisoned the atmosphere of the whole place, whatever the religious affiliation. The city "is a kind of prison, where the lives of the inmates are governed by an authoritarian church, and are besieged by a life-denying militantly Protestant society which itself suffers from a siege mentality" (*Selected Prose*, 63).

For Mahon the pursuit of his poetic art is the way out of this prison; one of his favorite quotes (and the one with which he opens the essay on Moore), is from Nietzsche: "We have art in order that we may not perish from truth." This does not mean, however, that Mahon feels free to withdraw from his people into some ivory tower (or Round Tower for that matter). Acknowledging a poetic responsibility to his community which is to be, in every sense, partial, he concludes "The Spring Vacation":

> One part of my mind must learn to know its place
> The things that happen in the kitchen houses
> And echoing back-streets of this desperate city
> Should engage more than my casual interest,
> Exact more interest than my casual pity.
> (*Poems* 1962-1978 4)

The opening line of the last stanza places Mahon in the same predicament as his fellow poets from the North; knowing one's place is a recurrent motif in the poetry of Montague, Heaney and Muldoon as well as of Mahon. In his poem "The Boundary Commission" Paul Muldoon locates this poetic dilemma in the context of modern Irish history. The very state which makes claims on the poet's allegiance is a dubious construct of the 1922 Treaty between England and the Pro-Treaty faction in Sinn Fein. This leaves the Northern poet and his people both standing on very shaky ground. In his study *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985*, Terence Brown gives a succinct outline of the history of the partitioned North:

> Since 1922 Irish unity had been a declared aim of all electorally significant parties. The 1937 Constitution, which defined the national territory as the whole island of Ireland, distinguished the

> jurisdiction of the existing state from the territory of the nation, "pending the reintegration of the national territory." In so doing the constitution reflected the widespread belief in the country at large that the constitutional arrangements of 1921 had left much unfinished business to be completed in the future. Crucial amidst such business was the undoing of the great wrong of partition in the reunification of the nation (279).

The details of the partition of Ireland were handled by a Boundary Commission; established in 1924, since it could come to no satisfactory conclusion, and no report was published until after the troubles broke out again in 1969, the border issue remained in a Limbo area, determined by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the vague terms of the Treaty. The outcome was a geographic and human disaster, setting the stage for the present shambles in the North. This borderline state has become an emblematic embodiment of the Northern Irish predicament. Muldoon captures the metaphysical unease of this situation in his eponymous poem:

The Boundary Commission

You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain

Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
It might have been a wall of glass
That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder what side, if any, he should be on
(Why Brownlee Left 15).

Muldoon's poetic persona, Golightly, is a slippery customer. Well aware that the poet is in danger of being swallowed up in this shifting ground, and that he is negotiating his way over long disputed territory, he flees "from alias to alias" ("Immram"), something he's been doing "for ages" with the agility of a shape-changer. Golightly undergoes multiple metamorphoses from his *immram* origins in the early Irish *Voyage of Maelduin*, to a Gaelic soldier in Elizabethan times; a "gallowglass/ hot-foot from a woodcut/ by Derricke," to Gallogly,/ otherwise known as Ingoldsby,/ otherwise known as English." ("The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants") This constant change of names traces the strategies by which the Irish struggled to survive and retain an

identity over time. Allusive as well as elusive and agile, Muldoon's method of knowing his place is to make every poem "a New Departure," starting out for the middle of nowhere, transferring the scene to some identifiable point in history or early Irish literature, and taking the reader to "the back of beyond" ("The Bishop").

Mahon, when compared to Muldoon, seems to have a less complicated response; his early poetry shows a growing awareness of the implications of Irish history. He accepts a communal obligation, if only with one part of his mind, and always with a view to encapsulating in the poem the strain between detachment and complicity. In her study *Poetry in the Wars*, Edna Longley points out that though Mahon's poetry rules out literary modes of affirming a sense of belonging to his tribe, "he characteristically internalizes the sins of his fathers ...when Mahon's poetry explicitly returns to roots, his persona acknowledges responsibility" (203). For the sake of his poetry Mahon needs to distance himself from his place of origin, not in order to forget or reject it, but precisely to gain the perspective that art demands. Mahon, like his fellow poets in contemporary Ulster, is simultaneously aware of the need to cut the umbilical cord, and of the danger in so doing, of also cutting the lifeline. John Hewitt (a poet who since his recent death has been adopted as a father figure, and even as patron

saint of Ulster Unionist poetry) had prescribed in *Ancestral Voices* that the writer be a "rooted man":

> The Ulster writer must, if he is not to be satisfied in remaining "one of the big fish in the little pond", seek and secure some recognition outside his native place. But the English language is the speech of millions. There is no limit to his potential audience. Yet I believe this had better not be achieved by his choosing materials and subjects outside or beyond those presented by his native environment. He must be a *rooted* man, 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 (115).

In his review of *Ancestral Voices* Derek Mahon takes issue with the rigidity of the preceding prescription. As one who has frequently shaken the native dust from his sleeve, Mahon protests:

> 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' "lonely impulse of delight"? (*Selected Prose*, 82)

Mahon, like his chosen progenitor Louis MacNeice, quite rightly resists such territorial claims on the artist, a resistance which becomes especially significant in the light of the territorial wars being enacted in his birthplace. A further complexity in Mahon's attitude, both to his Northern origin and to the act of writing poetry, becomes apparent when different published versions of "The Spring Vacation" are examined. When first published in 1964 in *Icarus*, the Trinity College literary magazine, this poem had a different final stanza. The earlier version of "Spring Vacation" was composed during pre-Trouble days, which Tom Paulin in "Before History" calls "the long lulled pause/Before history happens." At that time, both Mahon and Longley were at Trinity, Longley reading Classics while Mahon was reading French and existential philosophy. Besides sharing the creative squalor of a student flat in Merrion Square, they both wrote for *Icarus* and took trips together back to Belfast. In its original published form the poem is called "In Belfast," and is dedicated to Michael Longley, and has a final stanza as follows:

> 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.

Compared with the revision this is a much more high-spirited and light-hearted final stanza, written in the dismissive mood of the young philosopher-poet let loose for a while from school. Back among his own, with the family history of work in the shipyard amidst the certainties of "gantry, bolt and rivet," Mahon is more concerned with the posture of the hard wee Belfastman than with the effete intellectual Dublin companions temporarily left behind. The practice of poetry, socially commendable in Dublin, might, at that historic moment, have warranted ridicule in the Protestant working-class bars of Belfast. And so the playfully ironic final stanza directed at the dedicatee. On more mature reflection in the light of the political situation, and the acts of sectarian hatred that the "hard men" from his home community in Belfast had perpetrated by 1968, the stanza itself appeared far too frivolous and glib. For this reason, when publishing the poem in his first collection, *Night-Crossing,* in 1968, Mahon scrapped the original last stanza and wrote the much more ponderous one.

This is a good example of how history has affected poetry in Northern Ireland. Try as they might to avoid taking a stand, the poets and what they write are deeply influenced by what is happening. According to the distinguished scholar of Northern Irish literature, Terence Brown, this is as it should be. In the preface to his study, *Ireland, A Social and Cultural History,*

Brown points out that it would be a mistake to suggest that the arts in Ireland can be divorced from the social context in which they were produced. The paraphernalia of high culture, including "ideologies, ideas, symbols, literary and cultural periodicals, even lyric poems are social facts,... and they can only be fully understood within the material world in which they come to life" (*Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* 9).

By 1968 the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association had been on the march for a year demanding fair distribution of housing, fair access to employment for Catholics, the abolition of the Special Powers Act, and other basic human rights long denied to the Catholics of Northern Ireland. The demand for an end to gerrymandering was embodied in the marching cry "One Man, One Vote." These demands had met with a violent response from the ruling Protestant community. The marchers were set upon brutally by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the B Specials, a force created in 1922 to counter the IRA, notorious for its brutality and anti-Catholic bias. Derek Mahon had relatives in both these armed forces; in an interview with the present writer Mahon recalls playing, as a child, with sea-chests full of guns, at a time when guns were illegal in the Catholic community.

By July and August 1969, the season of the Orange marches (a long established tradition in which the marchers intruded in the Catholic areas of cities like

Derry and Belfast, beating their huge Lambeg drums and ritually affirming Protestant supremacy) led to a situation in which Ulster was on the brink of war. The 1969 marches were met with acts of passive resistance and civil disobedience. The attempt to exclude Protestants from Catholic areas and the unprecedented protest and resistance enraged the extremists in the Protestant community; they invaded the ghettoes with cans of petrol and all the accumulated artillery at their disposal and proceeded to burn the Catholics out of their homes. In his study *Ireland 1912-1985,* the historian J.J. Lee gives a vivid description of the people from The Falls and The Ardoyne in Belfast being burnt out of their homes in 1969 in a pogrom provoked by Protestant rage at the *Taigues* daring to ask for equal rights:

> Communal violence erupted as unionist crowds invaded the Falls. The RUC lost their heads, the Minister of Home Affairs sent in the B Specials, and the situation deteriorated drastically. At least 7 people were killed and about 100 wounded in this exhibition of unionist muscle; 3500 families, 3000 of them Catholic, were driven from their homes in Belfast . . . Exultant Unionists celebrated the burning of Bombay Street:

On 14 August we took a little trip,
Up along Bombay Street and burned out
all the shit,
We took a little petrol and we took a
little gun
And we fought the bloody fenians
Till we had them on the run (429).

By inserting this excerpt from an Ulster Defense Association songbook in his history of the horrors of that August in 1969, Lee gives some inkling of the mentality and the depths of hatred and prejudice underlying exercises in ethnic cleansing. On that occasion the government leader in Dublin, Jack Lynch, made a famous speech in which he claimed that the South would not stand idly by, but for the most part it did.

The poets were roused to action though: For once even the detached existentialist, Mahon, took a stand, however futile he may have considered it to be. His action is recorded in a poem by Michael Longley called "Letter to Derek Mahon":

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

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 Shankill and the Falls,
Our matches struck on crumbling walls
To light us as we moved at last
Through the back alleys of Belfast?
(Longley *Poems 1963-1983* 82)

Longley's opening question "And did we come into our own?" calls to mind Mahon's use of "our own" in "The Spring Vacation." Here Longley intertextually recalls the earlier use and stretches the expression to further meanings. "Come into our own" suggests coming into an inheritance, or it can be a reference to the Beatitudes in the *New Testament* (Luke 6:23-32). By aligning themselves with the passive protest of the keepers of the "imaginary Peace Line,' have Longley and Mahon earned a place amongst the meek who inherit the earth? The phrase also questions whether this nonpoetic gesture "minus muse and lexicon" marks a new, more mature phase in personal growth and development.

The hopelessness of the gesture as an effective political act is emphasized by identifying the two poets with Sisyphus "Two Sisyphuses come to budge/ The sticks and stones of an old grudge." (It is also a neat allusion to Longley's preoccupation with the classics and Mahon's affinity with existentialists like Camus, and his version of the myth of Sisyphus). The stones assigned in this instance to Sisyphus are another instance of intertextual reference; they surface again from Mahon's poem "Glengormley" where, in the lull before the present historical storm, the poet had mistakenly declared that "sticks and stones/would no longer harm" his generation. What Longley, with masterful understatement calls "an old grudge" has again erupted; the image of sticks and stones calls to mind figures like Bernadette Devlin at the barricades using stones and bits of pavement against the guns of the B Specials. The socio-historic implications of this are best expressed in Seamus Deane's poem "Derry" from his 1972 Collection *Gradual Wars:*

> The unemployment in our bones
> Erupting in our hands in stones;
>
> The thought of violence a relief
> The act of violence a grief;

Our bitterness and love
Hand in glove
(*Gradual Wars* 19).

Derek Mahon, coming as he did from the Protestant community of Belfast, could experience anguish and anger comparable to that of Deane, whose similar urban background in Derry's Bogside left him particularly vulnerable to calls from his Catholic community to get politically involved. Deane as well as Mahon chose to stick with the pen as a weapon at a time when many of his fellow Bogsiders were taking up the gun.

The nonviolent Civil Rights Movement had come to a bloody end in Derry on January 30 1972, when British soldiers, members of the crack-shot Parachute Regiment, drove into the marchers with their camouflaged Saracen trucks, opened fire, and killed 13 unarmed people, most of them just youngsters. From the poets in the North there was no immediate response to this atrocity. Only Thomas Kinsella, a respected Dublin poet, responded by voicing a protest in verse to this massacre, and then only when it was evident that the Widgery Tribunal had convened to investigate the matter merely in an attempt to whitewash British involvement in the eyes of the world.

Thomas Kinsella's poem "Butcher's Dozen" was first published in 1972 in pamphlet form. It is a satiric poem,

reviving an ancient Irish tradition of the poet as satirist, a tradition in which such powers were attributed to the satirist as the power to rhyme rats and even people to death. In this instance Kinsella employs his satiric powers to rhyme against a public wrong in Swiftian savage indignation. When "Butcher's Dozen" was later published in *Peppercanister Poems*, 1977, a "Commentary" section was appended to that collection. There the author states that the poem was written against the falsification of events contained in the report of the Widgery Tribunal; what Kinsella calls "the cold putting aside of truth." Recalling the contextual history of his poetic response, he continues:

> Though it was written in rage and haste at the time nothing has happened in the intervening six years that calls for serious revision . . . I couldn't write the same poem now. The pressures were special, the insult strongly felt and the timing vital if the response was to matter, in all its kinetic impurity. Reaching for the nearest aid I found the *aisling*—that never quite extinct Irish political verse form--in a late parodied guise: in the coarse energies and nightmare Tribunal of Merriman's Midnight Court. One changed one's standards, chose the doggerel route, and charged (142).

Kinsella, customarily a consummate stylist, took great poetic and political risks in writing this poem. The immediacy of response (the pamphlet was published and distributed within a week of the Tribunal report being made public) led to the imperative of lowered stylistic standards.

While poets like Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney expressed admiration for Kinsella's show of gumption and integrity, the critic Denis Donoghue seemed to imply that such poetry was cashing in on the violence in the North by getting, as it were, the horror of it hot, and he questioned its poetic propriety. In a lecture given at Princeton University, published in the Dublin magazine *Hibernia* in 1978, and subsequently printed in *We Irish* under the title "Literature and Trouble," Donoghue singles out Kinsella's "Butcher's Dozen" as emerging far too readily from the events which provoked it. While admitting that "it is hard to deny a poet the right to rant and rage when an act strikes him as peculiarly outrageous, as the events of Bloody Sunday struck Kinsella," Donoghue objects to the "exorbitance" of "direct, apparently unmediated feeling . . . demanding to leap into expression without any mediation" (*We Irish* 186). This criticism of Donoghue's fails to take into account that "Butcher's Dozen" was not written in immediate response to the events of Bloody Sunday and that it is far from being unmediated, since it takes the

perfectly legitimate traditional form of the *aisling*, and assumes the Swiftian tone of the satirist.

It is important to examine so closely the history of Kinsella's writing of "Butcher's Dozen" and Donoghue's critical response because such a critical approach seems to look askance at any immediate poetic meddling in historic events; the implication is that the quality of the poem inevitably suffers as a result. When, as a further salutary warning, we bring to mind Yeats' well-known declaration that we make poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves, but that we make rhetoric out of the quarrel with others, we can understand why lyric poets like Derek Mahon prefer to steer clear of overtly political verse. This sway of a critical interdict may be interpreted as an instance of what, in sonnet 66, Shakespeare refers to as "art being tongue-tied by authority."

In his lecture "Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland" (given at the Wordsworth conference in Grasmere in 1984, and published in pamphlet form the same year by the trustees of Dove Cottage) Seamus Heaney praises his fellow poets from the North for their preoccupation with style and the formal finish of the achieved lyric. In the degraded conditions of Paisleyite bombast, and sectarian acts of violence, the very act of writing poetry constituted an appropriate counterstatement: "The subtleties and tolerances of their art were precisely

what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerances of the public life" (5). The fellowship that the poets enjoyed outstripped the constraints imposed by the divides and partitions tearing apart their homeland; in place of the old ascendancy, the poets were launching a new transcendency, nurtured by verse letters, poems dedicated to each other, and subtle communion through intertextual reference to each other's work.

In an effort to publicize and promulgate this exemplary fellowship, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland sent out the poets two by two on reading tours with titles like "The Planter and the Gael" in 1970 (pairing off John Hewitt and John Montague), "Out of the Blue" in 1974 (coupling James Simmons and Paul Muldoon) and "In Their Element" in 1977 (featuring Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon). By doing these tours the poets were attempting to elevate the level of discourse and change the prejudiced perceptions that fed discrimination and violence. Looking back on such symbolic gestures, Heaney realizes that they were just a palliative, and for the poets involved, another form of entrapment. True transcendence for the poet would be most surely achieved through the act of writing poetry:

> The only reliable release for the poet was the appeasement of the achieved poem. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant

> completion, when the timeless formal pleasure comes to its fullness and exhaustion, in those moments of self-justification and self obliteration the poet makes contact with the plane of consciousness where he is at once intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments . . . It is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions . . . the purely poetic force of the words is the guarantee of a commitment which need not apologize for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune the discords the cudgels are creating (*Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* 7).

Heaney's passionate defense of the autonomy of art does not imply that the poem exists in a vacuum. On the contrary, he underlines the political status of the poem, pointing out that even pure poetry written in conditions such as those which prevail in Northern Ireland implies politics. Such pure poetry can be a valid form of resistance and refusal, as Mandelstam proved in Stalinist Russia. Like Mandelstam, Derek Mahon has produced a fastidiously formal poetry, and shunned the clamor and coarse rhetoric of the political arena. The increased alienation from his community resulting from the ongoing

warfare has resulted on Mahon's part in a tortured self-questioning.

Mahon's quarrel with himself extends to a self-mocking examination of the poetic act in relation to contemporary historical events. In "Rage for Order," written in response to the increasing violence in Northern Ireland, and published in the collection *Lives* in 1972, Mahon, with Shakespeare, Yeats, and Wallace Stevens in mind, contrasts the structure of the poem in relation to the surrounding reality:

> 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 might be, for his
> Is a dying art
> An eddy of semantic scruple
> In an unstructurable sea
>
> He is far
> From his people
> And the fitful glare
> Of his high window is as
> Nothing to our shattered glass.

His posture is
Grandiloquent, and
Deprecating like this,
His diet ashes,
...
If he is silent
It is the silence
Of enforced humility,

If anxious to be heard
It is the anxiety of the 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
Desperate ironies.
(*Poems 1962-1978 44*).

The poem alternately throws doubt on and reaffirms the power of poetry in a desperate time. In sonnet 65 Shakespeare had similarly questioned and affirmed the miraculous might of marks of black ink on a page to hold out "against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days." Mahon's fearful meditation has the same basic theme as Shakespeare's sonnet: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea/Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" For an Ulster poet like Mahon there is a particular urgency for the delicate lyric to hold out, and successfully resist the force of "the wrackful siege of batt'ring days" since this line of Shakespeare's sonnet summarizes the Northern Protestant sense of history since 1641. The poem is the container which must hold the plea, contrasted in its flowerlike effect to the explosions of rage. The movements of a pen along the page must achieve the end of art which is peace. As Seamus Deane puts it in his essay in *Celtic Revivals*, "Freedom from History": "If the end of art is peace, its origin is in the violence of the actual" and "its images have incorporated history's force into their stillness" (164).

In a time when the pent-up frustrations of centuries of injustice were leading to bombs exploding in rage throughout the North, Derek Mahon puts in a plea for a different kind of rage, a rage for order. The fragile voice of the lyric poet must persist behind the drums.

In Northern Ireland every year on the twelfth of July, it is the custom, in the course of the Orange Parade, for the Lambeg drum to be furiously pounded until the drummer's hands drip blood. Mahon's poetry, fragile as the flower of Shakespeare's sonnet, is anxious to be heard in order to make a counterstatement to the drum's savage sound. In such a context poetry seems to be "a dying art," yet still retaining (at least in a place like Ireland) enough residual cultural respect to possibly have the last word. The self-conscious style of the poetic persona seems to mock the pretensions of the poetic posture, but never denies the power of poetry or the human need for its germinal ironies. The cry "Now watch me as I make history" ties the persona of the poem to the pre-planter Ulster *filidh* whose responsibilities included being chroniclers of their clans (later in "Poem beginning With a line from Cavafy" Mahon refers to the "rheumatic chroniclers" in a scene depicting a clan gathering); the contemporary poet, cut off from that tradition, can "make history" by creating imagined worlds in the structure of the poem which have an effect on the everyday world in which we live.

Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" (which is intertextually evoked by the title of Mahon's poem) dramatizes this idea of the poem as creating a world. The idea of order that is the poem is encapsulated in the girl's song on the edge of the sea in

Key West. Her song imposes order on the unstructurable sea, which is Mahon's version of Yeats' "ungovernable sea":

> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
>
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and singing made
> (lines 37-40).

The lyric poet derives power, according to Stevens, from the ability to conceive of an alternative world and bring it into being. This gift for creating a "supreme fiction" constitutes the poet's importance in society. For this reason the desperate irony of Mahon's poem "Rage for Order" is that poets do "make history." The world we are exposed to in the history books is some (often unimaginative) historian's selective construct of an order out of the archival material available to him at the time of writing. Art, on the other hand, gives us what Yeats calls "a vision of reality." The reality of

art is a reality of a different order from that of the historian or the philosopher.

In his poem "Tractatus" Mahon quotes Wittgenstein's statement "the world is everything that is the case." He then goes on to show how poetry expands the world beyond such a literal and limited view: "The world, though, is also so much more—/Every thing that is the case Imaginatively".

The perspective of "Rage for Order" is an imaginative one, detached from the massacre; the poet takes his stand "somewhere beyond." He is "far/from his people/and the fitful glare/Of his high window is as/Nothing to our shattered glass." Mahon both mocks and approves of the "high window." Though not necessarily a window in an ivory tower, it is an elevated and detached view and Mahon both ratifies and questions this right to stake out the high moral ground.

In "The Sea In Winter" (a verse-letter addressed to fellow poet Desmond O'Grady, written in the late seventies when Mahon was writer in residence at the University of Coleraine in Northern Ireland) the poet persona asks "Why am I always staring out/of windows?" and then goes on both to question and reaffirm the value of the poetic enterprise:

And all the time I have my doubts
About this verse making.
.....
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-
Waste paper left there to indicate
our long days journey into night

But let me never forget the weird
haecceity of this strange sea-board,
the heroism and cowardice
of living on the edge of space,
or ever again contemptuously
refuse its plight; for history
ignores those who ignore it, not
the ignorant whom it begot
(*Selected Poems* 117).

This poem marks a turning point in the poet's attitude to the home place: "its weird haecceity" earns his poetic admiration and its historic plight evokes his pledge of poetic attention. The reality of lives, clinging

stubbornly to the "thisness" of their peripheral existence cry out to the poet for poetic affirmation.

The depth of the poet's identification and attachment to this courageous aspect of the Northern Protestant existence is best expressed in the poem "Nostalgias":

> The chair squeaks in the high wind,
> Rain falls from its branches;
> The kettle yearns for the mountain,
> The soap for the sea.
> In a tiny stone church
> On a desolate headland
> A lost tribe is singing `Abide With Me"
> (*Selected Poems* 54)

If one were to sit alone in a pew of the empty Holy Trinity Church in Portrush (Where the choir-boy Mahon spent his childhood holidays) and meditate, as the present writer did, on the hymn "Abide with Me" on page seven of the Church of Ireland hymnal, it is easy to imagine the yearning of the poet as "the darkness deepens," and "change and decay in all around I see" to abandon his cosmopolitan detachment and rejoin that shrinking choir in the little Protestant church on the headland by the sea; as the kettle yearns to return to the mountain from which it was mined, so the poet longs to return and abide with his "lost tribe."

Yet the attempts the poet has made to act on that nostalgic impulse have only aggravated his sense of alienation and metaphysical unease. "The Sea In Winter" leaves the reader with the sense that try as he might to dwell on the redemptive aspects of his Northern landscape, the carry-on of its occupants is driving him to drink:

> When I returned one year ago
> I felt like Tonio Kroger- 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 for 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, I found myself
> Unnerved, my talents on the shelf,
>
> Slumped in a deckchair, full of pills,
> While light died in the choral hills-
> On antebuse and mogadan
> Recovering, crying out for the sun
> (*Poems* 1962-1978 111).

Mahon, having returned to the home place, to be in the landscape that he loves, finds landscape and inhabitants inseparably bound together. The poem lists lovingly the names of towns on the north Antrim coast, and then names them as places where the "good, the beautiful and the true have a tough time of it":

> Portstewart, Portrush, Portballintrae-
> *un beau pays mal habité*,
> policed by rednecks in dark cloth
> and roving gangs of tartan youth
> (*Selected Poems* 114).

One can conclude from the conflicting sentiments of these poems that the poet longs to live amidst his people, but he is not able for it in life terms. By the conclusion of "The sea in Winter" he has indeed pledged himself not to ignore the North's historic plight; he needs however to frame it in the perspective of art's high window, from the psychic distance of the high ground, away from the scene of battle.

Already his elegy for Louis MacNeice, "In Carrowdore Churchyard" had formally drawn attention to "this high ground," and its aptness as the resting place for the poet. Drawing attention to the "humane perspective" possible from this vantage point, he

declares "This plot is consecrated for your sake/to what lies in the future tense" (*Selected Poems* 11).

A fellow poet like Heaney fully appreciates the tensions the poet experiences in a dark time. What Keats calls the poetic gift of negative capability only compounds the difficulties. In Heaney's lecture on Northern Poetry at Grasmere, he succinctly describes the tension caused by these conflicting pulls:

> The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable. This, and the complexity of the present conditions, may go some way to explain the large number of poems in which the Northern Irish Writer views the world from a great spatial or temporal distance, the number of poems imagined from beyond the grave, from the perspective of mythological or historically remote characters (*Place And Displacement* 8).

Mahon fits very well this description of the Northern poet; he is repelled by the dark side of the history of the Ulster Protestants' tenure in Ireland and by the injustices meted out to the displaced population. At the same time he is bound to this history. After all,

these are his people, and he is their poet. The desperate irony of this dilemma is not lost on Mahon and it informs much of his writing. Over the years he has developed ever-changing strategies to address his predicament. One such strategy is the Joycean one: to fly those nets by means of silence, exile, and cunning. Various forms of self-exile have guaranteed that Mahon is most of the time physically "far from his people." Meanwhile, the metaphysical unease of his relation to this history remains a central subject of Derek Mahon's poetry. It is as if he were resisting some mythic or prophetic call. In "The Last of the Fire Kings," Mahon draws upon stories from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to dramatize his feeling of an inescapable destiny:

The Last of the Fire Kings

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.

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 out 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.
(*Selected Poems* 58)

Mahon's Fire King is a composite figure made up of disparate elements from Frazer's mythic accounts.

Fascinated by the account of certain ritualistic practices in far off Cambodia, he creates a contemporary version set in his native Belfast. This provides him with a mythic form within which he can poetically enact his ties to his community, while at the same time exposing its similarities to the customs and the "barbarous" practices in the forests of Cambodia. The subversive nature of the poem is conveyed by the way it offends, namely by tearing down the sacrosanct tribal sense of separateness and superiority of Ulster Protestantism; implied in the colonial and imperial inheritance was a guarantee of "us" being different from "them." By breaking down superficial differences, the poet establishes that the North shares an archetypal mythic pattern with multiple cultures of primitive times.

"The Last of the Fire Kings" is a composite of two myths from *The Golden Bough*. The first of these is Frazer's account of The King of the Wood, a story connected to the grove of Diana at Nemi, depicted in Turner's painting "The Golden Bough". From this version Mahon gets the reference to the rite of the sword:

> Within the sanctuary at Nemi grew a certain tree of which no branch might be broken. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he slew

> him he reigned in his stead with the title of King of the Wood . . . This rule of succession by the sword was observed down to imperial times (*The Golden Bough* 13).

A less bloody story is the account of the Cambodian Fire King, whose royal functions were mystic and spiritual. The Fire King inhabits successively "seven towers perched upon seven mountains" (*The Golden Bough* 78). Every year the king must move on to dwell in another tower until in seven years the towers have all been dwelt in by him. At this time his tenure as fire king comes to an end and a successor is sought. If he becomes weak or in any way disabled during those seven years, he is ritually killed. This is in order to ensure that the energy embodied in him cannot be diminished by illness or enfeeblement.

Since it could be such a life-threatening occupation (and also perhaps because of the constant solitude in those towers) being Fire King was not a much coveted dignity amongst male Cambodians. At the time of the succession, all the likely strong male candidates from the hereditary sacred families would run away and hide. This extreme resistance to the office is a little puzzling since, provided one kept one's health, the life style seemed pleasant enough. Many aspects of it would at any rate seem guaranteed to appeal to a poetic or

sacerdotal temperament. In fact the account of the set up given by a French officer, who interviewed the reigning Fire King in 1891, sounds like the description of an Irish literary salon; the Fire King was found reclining on a bamboo couch, "diligently smoking a long copper pipe, and surrounded by people who paid him no great deference" (*The Golden Bough* 79-80).

The posture of the Fire King persona in Mahon's poem bears less resemblance to that of the sacred figure taking his ease in one of the Cambodian tower-houses than it does to that of the King of the Wood in Diana's grove at Nemi, sleeplessly waiting to be attacked by his assassin/successor:

> In the sacred grove at any time of day or night a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. The man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier . . . The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king, but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was

> visited by more evil dreams, than his . . . We picture to ourselves the scene as it may have been witnessed by a belated wayfarer on one of those wild autumn nights when the dead leaves are falling thick, and the winds seem to sing the dirge of the dying year--the rustle of the withered leaves underfoot, the lapping of the cold water on the shore, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, now in twilight and now in gloom, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulder whenever the pale moon peers down at him through the matted boughs (*The Golden Bough* 11-12).

Reading this account of Frazer, one can see how this figure would appeal to Mahon's imagination; the strange combination of murderous vigilance and wonderful scenery must have reminded him of the persistently paranoid siege mentality of his own native place. The descriptions of the wild scenery make Nemi sound a little like the North Antrim coast.

The ongoing war in Ulster, with its sense of endless cyclic recurrence and bloody rituals of besiegement seemed to evade any merely rational explanation. A poem like "The Last of the Fire Kings," along with other poems including Seamus Heaney's "Tollund Man" from his collection *North*, attempt through the use

of myth, to encompass obliquely the depth and persistence of these primal forces in the human psyche.

In his essay studying the relationship between history and contemporary literature in Ireland called "Awakening From the Nightmare," Terence Brown traces this fatalistic sense of *déjà vu*, not only in the work of the poets but also in such historic accounts as A. T. Q. Stewart's 1977 history of Ulster, *The Narrow Ground*:

> *The Narrow Ground* did much to confirm a view of the present crisis as the re-emergence in modern times of an antique struggle rooted, as Stewart seemed to hint, in an almost Jungian collective unconsciousness which drives Ulster men and women to deeds of desperation in generation after generation: 1641 is 1886 is 1912 is 1969 . . . The Northern Irish Unionist has preoccupied himself with a vision of his past and present which highlights the repetitive quality of his Irish experience. For a myth of an exacting and perennial siege cautions the Unionist against trust. There is therefore a profound sense of history as a given, as a nightmare from which it is impossible to awake (*Selected Essays* 245).

It is easy to see the resemblance between Stewart's "narrow ground" and that narrow grove in *The Golden*

Bough. Like the Nemian Priest-king, the ever-vigilant Unionists, with their sense of being a Chosen People, fearful of violent take over and loss of identity at the hands of the nationalists, enact the nightmare of their fate. Terence Brown chose as title for his essay Stephen's famous declaration in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Derek Mahon's portrait of the artist as fire-king declares "I am through with history" and attempts to flee the waking nightmare.

This Fire-King of Mahon may be enacting a very ancient prehistoric ritual, but he is a modernist fugitive, combining traits of Beckett's tramps and Resistance Refugees, dropping at night "from a moving train," striking out over the fields, "Not knowing a word of the language." His flight has been planned during the five years he has been prowling the grove keeping a fearful lookout for "the usurper." Quoting Christ's words in the New Testament, "who lives by the sword dies by the sword," he determines that he will "break with tradition," and end the "barbarous cycle." The conclusion of the poem situates the scene in "a world of/sirens, bin-lids/And bricked-up windows," that is in the world of contemporary war-torn Derry and Belfast. The fire-king persona of the poem has not managed to carry out "his cold dream" of escape. He yearns to be through with history, but the Mahonian irony of all this is that even

his attempt at escape is part of the cyclic ritual, re-enacting as it does the Cambodian version of the myth. He is caught in the "barbarous cycle." He may continue to dream of escape to "a place out of time," a kind of Ulster version of Yeats's Byzantium: "A palace of porcelain/Where the frugiverous/Inheritors recline/In their rich fabrics/Far from the sea" but his fate is sealed; his escape will not be allowed to succeed:

> 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 ironic tone of the poem, by now a trademark of Mahon's poetry, is an essential component of a style learnt partly from his fellow-Northerner MacNeice. It is

a style developed to deal with the difficulties of seemingly irreconcilable opposites. Poems that emerge from this quarrel with the self, out of which Yeats says poetry is made, are a form of dramatic lyric. In her study of Louis MacNeice, Edna Longley (also a perceptive critic of Derek Mahon's work) refers to a passage in a MacNeice essay called "Experiences with Images," which constitutes a key statement of this approach to the writing of lyric poetry:

> The word lyric has always been a terrible red herring. It is taken to connote not only comparative brevity but a sort of emotional parthenogenesis which results in a one-track attitude labeled `spontaneous' but verging on the imbecile. In fact all lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are *dramatic*-- and that in two ways (1). The voice and the mood, though they may pretend to be spontaneous, are yet in even the most personal of poets such as Catullus and Burns a *chosen* voice and mood, set defiantly in opposition to what they must still co-exist with; there may be only one actor on the stage, but the Opposition are on their toes in the wings-- and crowding the auditorium; your lyric in fact is a monodrama. Even in what is said (apart from the important things unsaid) all poems, though again in varying degrees, contain an internal

> conflict, cross-talk, back-wash, come-back or pay-off. This is often conveyed by sleight-of-hand-- the slightest change of tone, a heightening or lowering of diction, a rhythmical shift or a jump of ideas (qtd. in Edna Longley. *MacNeice: A Study* II)

In this passage MacNeice could be describing "The Last of the Fire-Kings"; the internal conflict of this monodrama is signaled by the sleight-of-hand of the lowered diction of the concluding stanzas. Between the lines lurks the symbolic struggle enacted between freedom and commitment. A superficial reading might lead to taking the line "I am through with history" at face value, but a more careful reading, alert to the nuances of the speaker's situation, exposes the underlying irony of the tone. It is the fire-king, sick of the "barbarous cycles," who wants to be through with history and escape to a place out of time. The tone of the poem remains elevated until the last three stanzas; these bring both the reader and the poem's persona back to reality with a jolt. The language becomes very ordinary and matter-of-fact. The fire-loving people "rightly perhaps" will not countenance any escape. Then the diction lowers even further to the world of "Sirens, bin-lids/And bricked-up windows"; this is the world that the persona of the poem is asked to inhabit--"Not to release them/From the ancient curse/But to die their creature/And be thankful."

The "ancient curse," along with the bin-lids (banged by women on the ground in the streets of the small terraced houses to warn of approaching British soldiers) situates the dramatic scene in the urban centers of the North of Ireland. The curse referred to is the curse, described in the *dindsenchas* of Emain Macha, put upon the men of Ulster in prehistoric times by the goddess Macha after she was forced to race against horses even though she was about to give birth to twins. The curse entailed a kind of *couvade:* Whenever the men of Ulster were called to go into battle, they were to be overcome with the pangs of childbirth. Cú Chulainn alone was exempt from the curse, and so was able to save the people of Ulster.

The role of the fire-king in Mahon's poem is not to be the savior of Ulster, releasing them from the ancient curse, but to be a kind of scapegoat figure, dying their creature, and being thankful for the privilege. The scapegoat figure traditionally takes upon himself the people's sins and this has a healing effect on the community. The conclusion of the poem seems simultaneously to sanction and question the right of the people to make such a demand. The strategic interjection of "rightly perhaps" is an example of the kind of "cross-talk" and rhythmical shift referred to by MacNeice in "Experience with Images." The "perhaps" leaves judgment delicately suspended as to what is the proper reading of

the poem: is this to be taken at face value or is it another example of Mahon's noted irony?

One reading, and the one that seems to me most consistent with Mahon's other lyric dramatization of the relation of the poet to his home place, is that there is no release possible for the poet from inhabiting, at least imaginatively, the world of sirens and bin-lids; no matter how he tries to flee, he is inclined to be pulled back by the gravity of time. The act of writing poetry is the only real way out. By continually dramatizing the conflict in the poem, the poet frees himself from the burden of silence and explores possible poetic ways of expressing inner states of mind.

In an essay on Samuel Beckett's poetry called "The Existential Lyric," Derek Mahon examines the "intentions and procedures" of Beckett's verse, describing it as a poetry of rupture. He proceeds to attribute to the poet a preoccupation with an existential anxiety caused by this experience: the poem is "the only way out of the tongue-tied profanity" a profanity, Mahon goes on to say, which has to do "with a metaphysical disjunction between subject and object, between the perceiving sensibility and everything external to it."

Mahon shares with Beckett this alienated sensibility, which both separates him from community and reconciles him only in the achieved communion of the poem. Estranged by his poetic sensibility from living at

one with his surroundings, Derek Mahon sometimes expresses guilt regarding his failure to manage somehow to stick it out and live in Belfast through the troubles, as his friends and fellow poets Michael Longley and James Simmons have done. "Afterlives," written for James Simmons, was, he told Willie Kelly in an interview in *The Cork Review* in 1981, written as a partial reply to accusations "of abandoning the North" and constant urgings "to return to my roots." The title of the poem indicates the perspective from which the present Troubles are viewed; it is a way of putting things in their proper place. The title is also both playful and ironic, playful as the first poem in the volume *Snow Party* which followed the volume *Lives*, and ironic because he refers to life after moving to London, away from Ireland and its Troubles.

Mahon's imaginative grasp of everyday historical events entails a Beckettian vision. In the interview with Kelly in *The Cork Review*, Mahon admits to constantly doubting the efficacy of writing poetry, and a simultaneous confidence which "somehow overrides the doubts." He finds it important that his poems "make room for the numinous, for the unexplained." Poetry can have value if it affirms its own helplessness:

> I think it's just a matter of putting things in a longer perspective than we generally think in. I've always been struck by the line in *Waiting for Godot*, they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. Things are before us and they will be here after us . . . There's a sense in which the human race flatters itself, takes too much for granted its own status as center of the universe. Some of my poems take the mickey out of human pride and pretension (*Cork Review* 11).

"Afterlives" is one such poem; it implies a tacit rebuke against those who think that they live at the center of things just because they live in a Trouble Zone. The poem also sharply questions the naive liberalism he had shared with some of his fellow poets in the sixties:

> 1.
> This is our element, the bright
> Reason on which we rely
> For the long-term solutions.
> The orators yap, the 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.
(*Poems 1962-1978* 57)

The words "love and poetry" refer to a line in a poem written by James Simmons, to whom "Afterlives" is dedicated. The Simmons poem is "Dangerous Bathing," from a collection of his poems published in 1967 under the title *Late But in Earnest*. The final lines of the Simmons poem were "A wise man knows his father, knows the sea,/Learns to endure our dangerous heritage,/And use our weapons, love and poetry" (43). Mahon's poem quarrels with such earnest claims; he questions the power of the wise middle-class writer of verse to set the dark places

ablaze with love and poetry. Liberal Northern Protestant notions of amelioration are questioned and are part of what Simmons calls "Our dangerous heritage." A more appropriate response to the mystery of human suffering, Mahon seems to suggest, is to recognize that we too are in a posture of prostration. The image of the dim forms kneeling at noon in the city has a numinous and primal power. Appealing to a level of human consciousness qualitatively different from "the bright reason on which we rely," we are inclined to respond with a shock of recognition that these dim forms prostrated in a posture of victimage and supplication are indeed ourselves.

The second part of the poem describes a return to Belfast after a long absence living and working in London. The poem of return enacts an archetypal pattern in Irish writing. Ever since the departures of early Christian monks like Columcille, in self-exile from Ireland, there are poems about going home or dreams of return. Whether written in the margins of early monastic manuscripts, or much later in nineteenth-century post famine emigrant newspapers, the genre follows a pattern of stricken lonesomeness. The Troubles in Northern Ireland have led to many of its people being displaced, or voluntarily choosing to leave the site of so much pain and discord. In his essay "A Northern Renaissance," Terence Brown remarks on the frequency and significance of this genre among contemporary Northern poets:

> Poet after poet in the North has written poems that imagine the journey back to origins, to the primal place, to Garvaghy, to Belfast, to Derry, to make, in the title of Frank Ormsby's beautiful poem of pained homecoming, "Winter Offerings." Such poems enforce a sense that there are things in the individual and collective past and present which his art must encompass if it is to be true to Irish reality (*Ireland's Literature* 217).

This second portion of "Afterlives" enacts with a delicate simplicity the time-worn pattern of the exile's return, with all the accompanying misgivings and sense of irretrievable loss:

> 2.
> I am going home by sea
> For the first time in years.
> Somebody thumbs a guitar
> On the dark deck, while a gull
> Dreams at the masthead,
> The moon-splashed waves exult.
>
> At dawn the ship trembles, turns
> In a wide arc to back
> Shuddering up the grey lough

Past lightship and buoy,
Slipway and dry dock
Where a naked bulb burns;

And I step ashore in a fine rain
To a city so changed
By five years of war
I scarcely recognize
The place 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
(*Poems* 1962- 1978 58).

The tone of this second part of is much more humble than the abstract and almost arrogant impatience of the beginning section. The point at which the tone of the poem changes is at the point of entry into the battle zone. Along with the ship which "trembles," the tone of the poem also "turns/In a wide arc to back/Shuddering up the grey lough." This is the mimetic nature of verse enacting its function as *versus:* the mood is one of

foreboding; the color imagery is dim and grey reflecting the devastated scene; the gloom is relieved only by the glimmer of light from the hills above Belfast. "The hills are still the same," sounds a note of hope and introduces the wide and spiritual perspective of the poem. The hills are a symbol of the numinous; the earlier poem "Spring Vacation" had stated "We could all be saved by keeping an eye on the hill/ At the top of every street, for there it is,/ Eternally if irreverently, visible." This poem reiterates the dim glimmer of hope held out by those hills.

The poem ends with the persona of the poem no longer so sure of his ground. Conscience-stricken at the changes in the city of his childhood he now sees before him, he questions whether he made the right choice in turning his back and moving away. The possibility that it might have been better to stay behind and live it "bomb by bomb" is examined tentatively. No claim is made that the poet's presence would have made a bit of difference to the place; rather, it is the effect of his not being there on his own personal growth to maturity which is in question. Between the lines is also the acknowledgment that the Ulster experience is essential to his maturation as a poet. The energies and atavisms resisted by the impulse to flight at the same time exert a pull back to the imaginative territory of his origins. Not having stayed at the scene of conflict was "perhaps" a missed

opportunity: "I might have might have grown up at last/And learnt what is meant by home."

In the Willie Kelly interview, Mahon elaborated on his feelings about leaving Belfast:

> I have at times felt guilt about abandoning-- if that's the word-- my home ground. I left it not for poetic reasons, but for life reasons; I just found it impossible to live there. I went back there recently only to re-discover the impossibility of living there. Although certain aspects of it survive in my memory, I have in many ways turned my back on it in life terms. I think it's my right to do so. I don't feel I'm under any obligation to devote my energies to the solution of the troubles in the North. I have felt guilt. My feelings are very complex. My attitude to Ireland is not a straightforward one because of the peculiar position of the Northern Protestant (*The Cork Review* 11).

This "peculiar position of the Northern Protestant" is as a result of history. The "Northern Protestant" is an historical construct. Originally constituting that part of the population of Ulster which turned Protestant during the Reformation, its numbers were swollen by the Plantation of Ulster under James the First of Scotland in the early seventeenth century. The Protestants who

colonized Ireland at that time were largely Scots Presbyterian farmers and artisans who displaced the local Irish population, the majority of which managed to survive the slaughter by either going into exile or taking to the surrounding woods and hills, sullenly plotting revenge.

The Protestants of Ulster meanwhile expended an inordinate amount of their energy in a defensive posture, trying to hold on to what, influenced by their religious mentality, they considered their promised land. Hundreds of years later, in 1912 when it looked like Home Rule for Ireland might become a reality, these Unionists were willing to take up arms against the English Crown in order to defend their birthright. They felt that they would lose their dominant and privileged status in an independent Ireland in which the majority would be Roman Catholic. Hence the slogan "Home Rule Is Rome Rule." England in the event conceded to Unionist demands; the Northern Ireland statelet was partitioned off from the rest of the country, sowing the seeds for the present Troubles in which the Irish Republican Army attempted by the use of force to coerce the total Northern Ireland population into a United Ireland. This a very simplistic version of the history which brought about the "peculiar situation of the Northern Protestant," but it fits a crude outline of the narrative prevalent in the popular

mind, and it nurtures the extremist posture articulated in Patrick Williams' 1974 poem "Cage Under Siege":

> This is home. This is the Irish North.
> On our borders the known world ends sheer.
> We've pulled the sea around us like a shawl
> And heaved the mountains higher. The waiting
> South's bog-barbarians starve against a grand
> Squiggle on our map. The sky is closed.
> This is home this is the Irish North
> (*The Wearing of the Black* 39).

Central to the cultural debate underway in contemporary Irish scholarship is the questioning of identities within Ireland. A discussion of the history of Unionism in Ireland and questioning of the Northern Protestant experience is being carried out most fruitfully by scholars such as Gerald Dawe, Terence Brown, Tom Paulin, Edna Longley, and John Wilson Foster. In this context it makes sense that Derek Mahon would attribute the complexity of his attitude towards Ireland to his status as a Northern Protestant.

In *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, for example, Mahon points to the Northern Protestants' "inherited duality of cultural reference," (a duality they have in common with their fellow Irish who are Catholic, one might point out), and declares that "their very

difference assimilates them to the complexity of the continuing Irish past" (14). Mahon's referring to the peculiarity of his situation as a Northern Protestant is really a strategy to allow him breathing space, a psychic area where he can align himself with fellow Northern Protestant poets of a previous generation such as Louis MacNeice, who in *Autumn Journal* explores his own relation to what Joyce called the nightmare of Irish history:

> Nightmare leaves fatigue
> We envy men of action
> Who sleep and wake, murder and intrigue
> Without being doubtful, without being haunted.
> And I envy the intransigence of my own
> Countrymen who shoot to kill and never
> See the victim's face become their own
> (XVI 7)

Mahon, like MacNeice, is haunted by self-doubt, and by the continuous and cumulative pain of imaginatively seeing the victim's face become one's own. Mahon is also adept at exploring, in poems like "Ecclesiastes," the life he might have lived if he had remained among his own and assumed the evangelical mantle of the millenialist prophet/poet:

Ecclesiastes

God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing,
    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. 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. Bury that red
bandanna 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 the corner stiff
with rhetoric, promising nothing new under the sun
(*Selected Poems* 31).

Mahon's intimate knowledge of the evangelical tradition in Ulster Protestantism makes of this poem a dramatic self-mocking monologue of a possible life as preacher, standing on a corner in the housing estate "stiff/with rhetoric," promising like the preacher in Ecclesiastes, "nothing new under the sun." This is one possible scenario of life as it might have been, had he stayed behind, among "his own" in Belfast.

Here again, as in "The Fire-King," we find the recurring nightmare image of the free spirit--Beckettian tramp or Woody Guthrie hobo-- brought to a halt by being recalled to serve out a stunting life sentence: "Bury that red/bandanna and stick, that banjo; this is your/country, close one eye and be king." History has already revealed the twisted perspective that results from closing one eye; the poem is Mahon's revelation of the dark side of his Ulster heritage--what Terence Brown in his seminal study *Northern Voices* describes as "the hidden Ulster, the Protestant planter's historical myth of conquest, and careful puritan self-dependence, frozen to a vicious stupid bigotry which constricts personal identity, crippling the possibility of change, growth and excellence" (195).

"Ecclesiastes" is a poetic tearing down of the decent facade of "respectable" Ulster Protestantism. The telling image of the "tied-up swings" reveals the extent of the "fierce zeal" of an edict which ensures that

children be prevented from enjoying some fun on a Sunday. However, the poetic images of the "dank churches, the empty streets,/the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings" almost convince the reader that "you could grow to love it." Side-by-side with Mahon's horrified rejection of the bigoted life-denying narrowness of the Northern ethos, there exists a "desperate love" for "the Antrim hills, the bog meadows," and even, or maybe especially, for "the heaped graves of [his] fathers." In a conversation with Derek Mahon in Dublin in 1985, published in the Spring issue of *Poetry Ireland Review*, Terence Brown remarked on how the North, in Mahon's poetry, "represents a kind of cultural deprivation," with no magic or "karma." Mahon's reply reinforces the feeling that he sees this very cultural deprivation, this state of extreme spiritual penury, to be not only historically significant but also acutely appealing to his poetic sensibility:

> All the better for the poems if they issue from a feeling of cultural deprivation. In so far as I've written about the North, what I've written 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 . . . my interest is in a kind of secular numen (*Poetry Ireland Review* 14).

This reference to the numinous in the context of a discussion of the poet's relation to the historical and social reality of his community illuminates the way Mahon writes out of the cultural experience of Irish Protestantism. Like Yeats, Beckett, and MacNeice, he has rejected the formal beliefs of religion, while retaining a sense of the mystic and seeking it in unlikely locations. In his introduction to the *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972), Mahon approves a poetic sensibility capable of discerning the numinous as a secular mystic residue inhabiting the most ordinary terrestrial objects. Quoting Nabokov in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Mahon refers to "that real sense of beauty which has far less to do with art than with the constant readiness to see the halo round a frying pan" (*Selected Prose* 13).

In poems like "The Mayo Tao" and "The Apotheosis of Tins" Mahon demonstrates his own affinity for the "mute phenomena," the "terminal democracy/of hatbox and crab/ hock and Windowlene." Attracted to these objects whose dereliction, and desertion by their erstwhile owners, has promoted them to the status of artifacts, Mahon makes of them a metaphor for the post historic; in their sewer of precognition, after "the erosion of labels," they await poetic metamorphosis into a new self-definition "Already in a lost hub-cap is conceived/the ideal society that will replace our own" ("The Mute Phenomena").

When Mahon applies this notion of flux in the permanence of things to his poems that have to do with human history, he introduces the possibility of fluidity to forms frozen in postures of defense; he confirms the contemporary artist as carrying on the Joycean tradition of forging the "uncreated conscience of my race" (*Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, 13). Over against the explosive noise of the bombs going off in the housing estate, he affirms the value of the quietude of poetry, and of the mystic places of silence it preserves, where an alternative future could be nurtured into existence.

In an essay he wrote for *Twentieth Century Studies* in 1970, during the terrible onset of the violence in Northern Ireland, Derek Mahon clearly took a stand on the side of the efficacy of poetry in a dark time:

> Events [in the North], which began as social protest and degenerated into a mere religious war, have become increasingly depressing in form and outcome; but this is only the start. Battles have been lost, but a war remains to be won. The war I mean is not, of course, between Catholic and Protestant 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 to 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--people talking to each other, with honest subtlety at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time (93).

This statement elucidates why so many of Derek Mahon's poems are written for fellow artists and friends; the dialogic relations "at a profound level" established in this manner create what Edmund Burke considered the basis of a sound society--the "little platoon" of family. The ugly sectarian nature of the conflict in the North as well as the needs of his own poetic sensibility had alienated Mahon from his family of origin. The loss accruing from this separation was partly compensated for by the creation of a community of the imagination, occupying a zone beyond combat, a charmed circle where the only border is the circumference of the poem.

In his essay on Mahon's poetry, "Icon And Lares," Gerald Dawe attributes this Mahonian creation of a transcendency to his disillusionment with the conditions in the historical world around him. Dawe quotes Edward Said in *The World The Text and The Critic* to show that the inventing of an alternative order has a precedent in the lives of modern writers since Joyce, where "affiliative values" are substituted for failed

"filiative" bonds (*Protestant Imagination* 218). Dawe goes on to point out that it is this mutual experience of spiritual displacement which attracts Mahon to write poems after the fashion of Beckett and Cavafy, Pasternak and Brecht (220). These fellow writers, as well as artists like Munch and Van Gogh, are for Mahon exemplary models of the poet's relation to the society of his time; all of them share an uneasy relation to the establishment.

Asked by Terence Brown about his sense of audience, (in the 1985 interview), Derek Mahon replied that when he started writing in the sixties, his imagined audience was "a few friends, Irish, English, and American, the kind of mixture of people . . . running *Icarus* at the time," not what one would suppose to be his ready-made audience, what he refers to as Myles na gCopaleen's notion of the plain people of Ireland, and most particularly the plain people of Ulster. At that time Mahon did not have much confidence in his ties to that audience. He yearned to break out of its cultural constraints and communicate with his little platoon of like minds. Sometimes indeed he seems to lose confidence in the benefit of any human society, and to desire the solitude of early Irish monasticism or the Zen solitude of an Asian sage, exchanging his "forkful of the general mess / for hazelnuts and watercress" ("Beyond Howth Head" *Selected Poems* 44).

Mahon's poem "The Snow Party" (dedicated to the American poet Louis Asekoff) is written in this Zen spirit of solitude and deceptive simplicity. "The Snow Party" is the title poem of the collection of Mahon's poems published in 1975. Based on a work by the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (1644-94), called *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (a title sure to attract the attention of an Ulster poet like Derek Mahon), Mahon's "The Snow Party" sustains an almost surreal elegance of style while incorporating into the poem a sense of the dissonance in the world outside:

The Snow Party

Basho, coming
To the city of Nagoya,
Is asked to a snow party.

There is a tinkling of china
And tea into china;
There are introductions.

Then everyone
Goes to the window
To watch the falling snow.

Snow is falling on Nagowa
And further south
On the tiles of Kyoto

Eastward, beyond Irago,
It is falling
like leaves on the cold sea.

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 Nagowa
And the hills of Ise
(*Selected Poems* 57).

In Mahon's own copy of the Penguin Classic translation of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (kindly made available to this writer), there is a bookmark at page seventy six, where Basho, in the middle of his pilgrimage to the shrines and historic places of the distant north of Japan, describes crossing the pass of

Hakone in the falling snow. Then he simply states "I was invited to a party" and continues in verse:

> Stretching by force
> The wrinkles of my coat
> I started out on a walk
> To a snow-viewing party (76)

Mahon's poem takes off from this hint, imagining what this snow party might have been like. The image of snow already had a particular resonance for him, because of the celebrated poem "Snow" by Louis MacNeice, and because of the celebrated passage about snow at the end of Joyce's short story "The Dead"; the lines "Snow is falling on Nagowa/And further south on the tiles of Kyoto. Eastward beyond Irago, it is falling/like leaves on a cold sea" call to mind the passage at the end of "The Dead" about another mystical journey:

> The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward...snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly on the bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves (*Dubliners* 256).

Though the scene of Mahon's "The Snow Party" is set in Japan, it is full of images that evoke both human history elsewhere and literary history in Ireland. Besides the Joycean intertextual echoes in the descriptions of snow, there is reference to the window where everyone "crowds/ to watch the falling snow." This is a reference to Basho's "glass, chaste with flowers of snow" but also to the window in MacNeice's poem "Snow":

> The room was suddenly rich and the great bay window
> Spawning snow and pink roses against it
> Soundlessly collateral and incompatible
> World is suddener than we fancy it
> (*Collected Poems* 57)

Mahon's poem attains its effect by the serene restraint of its tone; MacNeice's poem on the other hand overflows with exuberance: it is all about "The drunkenness of things being various." The last line leaves us with a sense of the mystery in the connection and simultaneous separateness of things: "There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses."

"The Snow Party" is about how the world of historic events exists outside the glass of the perfect still life of the poem; the world of tinkling china and elegant tea ceremonies seems serenely oblivious to anything extraneous to the pursuit of beauty. *The Narrow Road to*

the Deep North was written in 1689, an ill-fated time in Irish history. During that time in Mahon's Deep North the siege of Derry was taking place, which was followed by the Protestant settlement and the Battle of the Boyne between William of Orange and James the Second. These are the "barbarous kings" of the poem in whose service "Thousands have died since dawn." Elsewhere, in far off New England, another set of puritans is conducting the Salem witch trials, burning people "in the boiling squares"; nothing of this impinges on the quietude of the poem, the persistent "silence/in the houses of Nagowa/And the hills of Ise." The truth of the matter is of course that it does intrude, and is meant to intrude. The poem's journey eastward toward quietude and mysticism is shadowed by the Joycean journey westward into the land of the dead. It is shadowed also by what the Irish historian, Nicholas Canny, refers to as The Westward Enterprise of countries like England, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and the harsh history of the puritan presence in Ulster. The "barbarous kings" struggle on Irish soil for the English throne, and the New England Puritans burn witches and heretics and anyone who will not conform--and this after they themselves made their own long, arduous journey for the cause of religious liberty. "The Snow Party" establishes the extent to which one part of Mahon's mind is always preoccupied with some aspect of the literary heritage and the troubled history of his

home place, no matter how far he ventures imaginatively into other deep Northern regions.

The title of Basho's account entered Mahon's consciousness and surfaced again as an image in "The Sea In Winter" of access to an ideal society through the narrow passage of the poem:

> 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
> in our better nature (*Selected Poems* 117).

Unfortunately, this possible future is only a dream or a fairy-tale that may happen "One day"--a day very unlikely things start to happen, "the day the Dying Gaul revives" and "the day the rainbow ends." On that day the little platoon will have reason to celebrate ("the wine goes round among the friends") since their dedication to "making it new" in poetry has succeeded in making the world new as well.

The poet knows how remote a possibility this is, and ends on a sour note "Meanwhile the given life goes on/There is nothing new under the sun." We are back on the desolate ground of "Ecclesiastes" and have veered away from the narrow road to the Deep North and the

promise of its becoming the "road to Damascus" where Northern counterparts of the zealot Saul might be struck from their high horses and undergo Pauline conversions.

Sudden change is not necessarily what is needed, or indeed desired in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland; sudden change is the method of physical force; as Edna Longley in her essay "From Cathleen to Anorexia" points out, "false hopes and fears are invested in the convert syndrome" (*The Living Stream* 178). Genuine change is almost imperceptible like the plea of beauty, in Shakespeare's sonnet; or like "The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow/Each fragile solving ambiguity" which Derek Mahon perceives as the contribution of MacNeice in his elegiac tribute "In Carrowdore Churchyard." MacNeice himself, in his study *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats,* responds to Auden's claim in *his* elegy for Yeats that poetry makes nothing happen:

> The fallacy lies in thinking that it is the *function* of art to make things happen and that the effect of art upon actions is something either direct or calculable. It is a historical fact that art *can* make things happen (192).

What poetry makes happen is a change in sensibility; the artist does not have to make dramatic speeches about going to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated

conscience of his race; he can just get on with the poetry, and the wide-ranging reach of his imaginative vision will subtly transform over time the cultural context.

Chapter Two

"Dreaming Myself to That Tradition"

The sixties, in most western societies, were a time of intellectual revolt and iconoclasm. In Ireland this entailed, in the republic, the release of Dionysiac energies to end the stifling grip of church and state on the people even in the most minute details of everyday life. In the North the civil rights movement determined to tear down the barriers that kept people from full freedom as citizens of their state.

John Montague sounded a joyful note of release when in his poem "A New Siege," he proclaimed: "Old moulds are broken in the North." In the south his verse also registered the seismic changes connecting the released energies to the festivals of Irish music, milieux in which the revived traditional music broke free from the constraints of clergy. His poem "The Siege of Mullingar, 1963" captures the optimistic exuberance of that new dawn:

Everything then
In our casual morning vision
Seemed to flow in one direction,
Line simple as a song:
Puritan Ireland's dead and gone
A myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain.
(*Selected Poems* 62)

The poet's casual morning vision of the easy flow of the currents of change very soon, however, was modified by the violent resistance to change in the North — the lines of protesters met by lines of armored cars and helmeted police, "lines of action" met by "lines of reaction."

In the preface to his long poem *The Rough Field*, Montague associates the origin of the poem with "a kind of vision, in the medieval sense," of his home area, Tyrone, and "of the unhappiness of its historic destiny." The inspiration for the poem came on one of his trips back to the North of Ireland, where he had spent his childhood, from Berkeley, where he had been teaching. At places like Berkeley and the Iowa writer's workshop, Montague had met the American poet Robert Duncan. In a 1984 interview, Derek Mahon (praising Montague's cultivation of "the historical sense," which Eliot had declared to be so essential to poetry of any lasting

value) pointed out to me that the inspiration for Montague's project must have partly stemmed from Robert Duncan's poem *The Opening of the Field*. Montague, like Duncan, is returning to the source, the first beloved place, in order to tap into a field of force that is universal; for Montague the force-field that held primal energies was the rough field, his home townland Garvaghy (*garbh achaidh*, a rough field); for Duncan it was a more expansive meadow:

> Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
>
> . . . . .
>
> that is a made place, created by light
> Wherefrom the forms that are shadows fall.
>
> Wherefrom fall all architectures I am.

Duncan's meadow is "a made place," "a ring a round of roses," a talisman "that certain bounds hold against chaos." One can see how Montague, faced with the daunting task of transforming the fragments of his own and his people's past into the order of his poem, would have found Duncan's notion of the all-enfolding field an enabling one.

Montague had been engaged in the project of this long poem before the Troubles broke out again in the North; since he had been brooding over the harsh history

of his home place, the force of these events struck him like the recurrence of an Ulster curse, and he felt psychically implicated in the course of history:

> Although as the Ulster crisis broke, I felt as if I had been stirring a witches' cauldron, I never thought of the poem as tethered to any particular set of events. One explores an inheritance to free one's self and others (Preface 7).

At the time the troubles turned from civil protest to armed violence, poets on every side turned away in aversion, like Hamlets who felt they had no writs to set right the cursed time. For a time he remained living in Dublin, staring at the turbulent sea from the high windows of his flat in Monkstown, and reading obsessively through the history archives and the State Papers in Trinity college library, ostensibly doing research for a play on Hugh O'Neill, the last great Gaelic leader of Ulster, but really, to paraphrase Montague's words, exploring his Ulster heritage to free himself from a deepening sense of alienation and despair.

In Ulster, names are indicators of tribal and class origins, in his poem "The Ministry of Fear," Seamus Heaney writes about being stopped at barricades and asked his name:

> And heading back for home, the summer's
> Freedom dwindling night by night, the air
> All moonlight and a scent of hawthorn, policemen
> Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round
> The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing
> The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:
>
> `What's your name, driver?
>
> `Seamus. . .'
>
> *Seamus*? (*North* 64)

Heaney's answer would evoke from the RUC what Mahon, in "Spring Vacation," referred to as "the knowing nod," and place him immediately as a "Taigue" (Ulster racist name for a Catholic "native"), from a "fenian" neighborhood; the same would be true of Muldoon's name. Montague's and Mahon's names were not as easy to place; Montague's name has an Anglo-Norman resonance so he could be a Protestant, but amongst the bigots in Northern Ireland the "Taigue" part of the word "Montague" would be very quickly detected and he would be labeled a Catholic, and therefore one of "Them". Derek Mahon, on the other hand, would be construed as Protestant. The raw sectarianism exposed by the violence made day-to-day life a form of torture. Poets like Heaney moved South; his poem "Roots" expresses some of the emotional trauma that led to his and his family's decision:

Roots

Leaf membranes lid the window
In the streetlamp's glow
Your body's moonstruck
To drifted barrow, sunk glacial rock.

And all shifts dreamily as you keen
Far off, turning from the din
Of gunshot, siren and clucking gas
Out there beyond each curtained terrace

Where the fault is opening. The touch of love,
Your warmth heaving to the first move,
Grows helpless in our old Gomorrah.
We petrify or uproot now. (*Wintering Out* 39)

Derek Mahon, already living in Dublin, and for a long time already uprooted, at this time begin a soul-searching examination of his own cultural roots. Since his early education had reinforced his sense of identity as British, and left him without any intellectual grounding in the Irish past, he set off on an independent journey of exploration.

In addition to the resources of the national and university libraries, Mahon had at his disposal the cultural resources of Dublin itself, where a parallel effort at recuperation and retrieval was underway; Dolmen Press had recently published Thomas Kinsella's translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, Seán O'Ríada had initiated a whole new appreciation of traditional Irish music, and Brendan Behan could be heard singing the praises of the Irish language around the Dublin pubs. The films *Mise Eire* and *Saoirse* were being made by George Morrison about the Irish struggle for freedom from 1916 to 1922. Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* called attention once again to the way of life on that remote western seaboard.

Ever since the Irish Literary Revival, led by Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, the west of Ireland has achieved the status of a dream country of myth, location of the Hy-Brasil of old legend. Poets from the North of Ireland, while firmly affirming their urbanity, and distancing themselves from the rural mind-set of the Revival, perpetuate in their work this mystique of the West. Louis MacNeice claimed the west as his birthright, and felt alienated in Belfast, locating his "pre-natal mountain" far away in Connemara; Heaney, in poems like "Lovers on Aran" and "Oysters," designates the west as dreamscape of equilibrium and plenitude, providing respite and spiritual renewal; Paul Muldoon's Longley selection in

his edition of *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* suggests that Michael Longley also sees the west as the repository of a natural munificence ("Leaving Inishmore") and self-renewal; in "A Letter to Seamus Heaney," written from Carrigskeewaun in Killadoon, County Mayo, Longley refers to his place in the west as "That small subconscious cottage/where the Irish poet slams his door," or, alternatively, as an expansive open space: "The mind open like a half door/To the speckled hill, the plovers' shore." Tempted by his affinity for western landscape to "go native" and "take my stand," he pulls himself up with a wry reminder of all that separates him from the culture of the locals:

> Beneath these racing skies it is
> A tempting stance indeed-*ipsis*
> *Hibernicis hiberniores*-
> Except that we know the old stories,
>
> The midden of cracked hurley sticks
> Tied to recall the crucifix,
> Of broken bones and lost scruples,
> The blackened hearth, the blazing gable's
> Telltale cinder where we may scorch our shins
> Until that day
> We sleepwalk through a No Man's Land
> Lipreading to an Orange band (221).

The west and its mythic and literary associations appealed greatly to Derek Mahon when he visited Aran with Michael Longley in the mid-sixties. Mahon's poem written about that occasion expresses simultaneously his attraction to that ancient, rooted way of life and his awareness that he is, and will always remain, an outsider by temperament and choice:

In the Aran Islands

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 off from the tin roof
Of an outhouse, planing over the ocean,
Circling now with a coarse inchoate
Screaming the boned fields of his vision.
God, that was the way to do it,
Hand clasping, echo prolonging poet!

Scorched with a fearful admiration
Walking over the nacreous sand,
I dream myself to that tradition,
Fifty winters off the land-
One hand to the ear for the vibration,
The far wires, the reverberation
And in the other hand your hand

The long glow leaps from the dark soil, however-
No marsh-light holds a candle to this.
Unearthly still in its white weather
A crack-voiced rock marauder, scavenger, fierce
Friend to no slant fields of the sea either,
Folds back over the forming waters.
(*Poems* 1962-1978 34)

While describing the posture of the *sean nos* singer, Mahon's "fearful admiration" for this ability of the unaccompanied voice to sing "the darkness into the light," co-exists with a sense of alienation; he feels shut out, and he shuts himself out: "I close the pub door gently and step out/Into the yard, and the song goes out." The persona of the poem gently shuts the door on the possibility of the likes of him ever being an insider in that tradition.

"The song goes out" has the obvious meaning of its no longer being heard because the door is shut. Perhaps it also means that the song is this poem and it goes out now to encompass the gull creaking "off from the tin roof of an outhouse," circling "the boned fields of his vision." The poem celebrates the "earthed" tradition: the Heideggerian "long glow" that "leaps from the dark soil," earned, in this case, by the harsh life of the islanders—"Fifty winters off the land"; this tradition has persisted on the western seaboard since Mesolithic times, "down light-years of the imagination."

The poet dreams himself to that tradition, and affirms "no marsh-light holds a candle to this." The marsh-light would be the flickering gaseous light of ephemeral song. The poem does not leave the choice only between the spurious marshlight and the sure fire of traditional hearth, however; the strongest and most numinous presence in the poem is the bird who flies free, the "cracked-voiced rock marauder." The crack-voiced scavenger is, for Mahon, a more authentic image of the contemporary Irish poet who writes in English: an inheritor of waves of marauders who scavenged the land since prehistoric times; he is a survivor flying free of all the nets. He has learnt to trust no final landing place: "fierce/friend to no slant fields or the sea either" He is, because of the inclusiveness of his vision, a symbol of a truly creative force. In the book

of *Genesis* we are told "the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*Genesis* 1;2). The last line of Mahon's poem gives the bird of the poem a numinous aura as it "folds back over the forming waters." Mahon, like the *sean nos* singer, an "echo-prolonging poet," demonstrates in these lines the ability to scavenge amongst all the fragments of past traditions and create a new form of song. He may self-deprecatingly call it "inchoate," and "crack-voiced," but it is a true contemporary embodiment of the lyric voice "unearthly still in its white weather."

In dreaming himself to the Gaelic-language tradition on the Aran Islands, Derek Mahon came at the same time to a self-ratifying awareness: he would never fully belong to any one facet or strand of tradition; he would be one of its postmodern scavengers soaring free of all the slanted fields. He would come away from his encounter with Aran with the memory of that experience to act as a touchstone for the poetic enterprise. The poem "Thinking of Inishere in Cambridge, Massachusetts" is Mahon's hymn of thanksgiving for that simple vision:

> A dream of limestone in sea light
> Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.
> Reflection in that final sky
> Shames vision into simpler sight;

> Into pure sense, experience.
> Atlantic leagues away tonight,
> Conceived beyond such innocence,
> I clutch the memory still, and I
> Have measured everything with it since.
> (*Poems 1962-1978* 27)

The line "Conceived beyond such innocence" locates the poet on the outside; the use of "conceived" implies exclusion by both birthright and intellectual choice. The implication is that by reason of his birth into a Northern Protestant Anglophone tradition Mahon is shut out from the "innocence" of this landscape and way of life. In Ireland, simply by being "conceived" one is burdened with belonging to one side or the other of an historic heritage; this is popularly referred to as "the divide," with cultural and religious undertones.

In his autobiographical poem "Carrickfergus," Louis MacNeice expresses this doom most succinctly; his birth-town Belfast was built to exclude the displaced and humiliated native Irish during the Norman conquest: "The Norman walled this town against the country/To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave." By reason of being born a Protestant, MacNeice feels he is defined as complicitous with these perpetrators of dispossession and exclusion; a sad consequence of this is that he himself

now feels dispossessed and excluded from a whole segment of the Irish heritage:

I was the rector's son, born to the Anglican order,
Banned forever from the candles of the Irish poor;
The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept
With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.
(*Collected Poems* 69)

The reference to the Chichesters implicates MacNeice in the actions of the Elizabethan conquest. In May 1601 (just six months before the fated battle of Kinsale, which marked the end of any hope for the recovery of Gaelic rule in Ireland) Sir Arthur Chichester, adding the religious zeal of the Protestant reformer to the usual motives of the colonizer, had ravaged the stronghold of the O'Neills at Clandeboye using Carrickfergus as a base. In his report to Mountjoy (who was later that year to defeat Hugh O'Neill at Kinsale), he boasts about his exploits:

> We have killed, burnt, and spoiled all along the lough within four miles of Dungannon . . . We spare none of what quality or sex soever, and it hath bred much terror in the people (qtd. in Bardon 110-111).

MacNeice's "Carrickfergus" marks the sense of guilt that, by association with such fellow members of the Anglican Communion as Chichester, being "born into the Anglican order" implies.

The oversimplification and unfairness of this equation of communion and cultural community becomes evident when we consider that MacNeice is a very old Gaelic name derived from that of Conor Mac Nessa, the king of Ulster who flourished at the time of Cú Chulain. MacNeice himself was aware of this tie and was fond of pointing out his immediate family's West of Ireland peasant origins. One supposes that at some point in history one of his family "took the soup"; that is, like some of the Catholic Irish during the Famine who accepted soup from Protestant proselytizers, a MacNeice ancestor turned Protestant.

Derek Mahon, too, has patronymic Gaelic origins. The last name Mahon was originally Mac Mahon, and belonged to Gaelic chieftains of South-East Ulster at the time of Sir Arthur Chichester and Hugh O'Neill. The actual ethnic hybridity of the Irish, versus the simplistic notions of "pure Planter stock" and "pure Gaels," is now (none too soon) the subject of much cultural research and debate in Ireland; Muldoon's poem "Mules" slyly celebrates "what was neither one thing nor the other" as a result of cross-breeding.

In her study of MacNiece, Edna Longley points out how fruitful MacNeice's "cultural complexity" proved as subject matter for his poetry and she reminds the reader that Yeats shared the same complex attitude, stating that the more "procrustean" critical categories were the recent tragic result of an Ireland partitioned intellectually as well as geographically. With humorous echoes of the political rhetoric of contemporary Northern Ireland--where Sinn Fein, for example, is referred to as the political wing of the IRA (and where she herself has mischievously referred to the *Field Day* enterprise, led by the playwright Brian Friel, the actor Stephen Rea, and the poets Paulin, Heaney and Deane, as "the intellectual wing of the IRA")—Edna Longley underlines the exemplary importance of MacNeice:

> Because MacNeice's poetry dramatizes polarities engendered by Ireland, such as that between belonging and alienation, it has become a focus of the literary wing of current debates about identity in Northern Ireland (13).

At the time that Derek Mahon wrote his poem "In the Aran Islands," sectarian thinking was prevalent throughout Ireland. People in the Irish language movement were often guilty of this binary mode of thought; the concepts "Gaelic" and "Catholic" were thought to be

identical and opposed the labels "Anglo" and "Protestant." Even sophisticated intellectuals like Mahon were vulnerable to being caught in this suffocating web. Forgetting that the attempt to salvage and revive the Irish language, after the ravages of conquest and famine had been spearheaded by Protestants such as Sir Samuel Ferguson, Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats, Mahon sees himself, not as part of the Gaelic tradition, but only as "dreaming" himself to that tradition. Not wishing to be confined by the strait-jacket self-imposed by such categories, Mahon was by 1970 at the end of his patience with cultural life in Dublin, and, seeking broader literary horizons, moved to London.

Before his impatience and despair, Mahon had tried to effect some cultural transformations. He wrote essays and reviews, and, with Bill Mc Cormack and Seamus Deane, started the literary journal *Atlantis,* attempting to provide something missing from the cultural life of Dublin at the time. *Atlantis* sought to bring a more international literary awareness to the city; it lasted for sixteen issues.

An article written by Mahon for the November 1970 issue of *Twentieth Century Studies* shows the extent of his disillusionment and impatience with the prevailing provincialism in Irish letters:

Like Ireland itself (and I intend no sneer), the "Irish" poet is either unwilling or unable to come to terms with the "twentieth century". This begs at least one question of course, and in any case one cannot prescribe for poets what they should write about or how . . . Montague and Heaney, by reason of their Northerness, have avoided (Dublin literati please note) the narcissistic provincialism in which "Irish" literature is currently sinking, and have found, each for himself, a voice which, whilst remaining true to the ancient intonations, has something to say beyond the shores of Ireland. Born within close range of it, they can assimilate to the traditional aesthetics which are their birthright some of (to risk pretentiousness) the cultural fragmentation of our time. Simmons and Longley, ironic heirs of a threadbare colonialism, have as their birthright that very fragmentation. *Mutatis mutandis*, their relationship, as men of good will, to the indigenous Catholic-Irish culture is not unlike that of Camus to the Algerian Muslim's as delineated by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his admirable Fontana study . . . Longley and Simmons consult a diffuse and fortuitous assembly of Irish, British and American models, not necessarily in that order. In this they are true to their dissociated sensibilities (Camus could never have been an

> `Algerian' writer); although one could wish that, though free to refuse, they might not deprive themselves so completely of the Irishness at their disposal. But there one cannot prescribe. The diffuseness and dissociation are sufficiently evident in Longley's *No Continuing City*, Simmons' *Late But in Earnest* and in my own *Night-Crossing*. The poems in these collections, if not the collections themselves, antedate the political events of the last two years, but not the spirit which inspired them (91-92).

With its sectarian labels and its polarizing rhetoric, Mahon's essay is also symptomatic of "the spirit which inspired" the political events in Northern Ireland. The contorted and convoluted liberalism that juxtaposes "threadbare colonials" to the "indigenous Catholic-Irish" makes one wonder how many hundreds of years one's ancestors have to live in Ireland before one considers oneself "indigenous." Or are the terms "Catholic-Irish" and "indigenous" implicitly synonymous in this way of thinking?

Heaney and Montague, even though mere indigenous Catholics, are credited with assimilating "some of the cultural fragmentation of our time." According to Mahon, this has been made possible by their being "born within close range of it." What does this mean if not that

Northern Ireland is somehow geographically closer to "the mainland," and therefore to mainstream English culture? This betrays a Unionist topography in Mahon's thought patterns and a partitioned intellect vis à vis writers in the Irish republic. His seeming lack of awareness at the time he wrote that article, that cultural fragmentation is an essential part of the Irish cultural birthright both North and South, is especially puzzling.

In a paper delivered at the Modern Languages Association in New York in 1966 (four years before Mahon wrote this article) Thomas Kinsella, after giving a thoughtful analysis of the Irish literary tradition mutilated by conquest and the loss of the Irish language, concludes:

> The continuity or the mutilation of tradition becomes in itself irrelevant as the artist steps back from his entire world, mutilations and all, and absorbs it . . . Relationship to tradition, whether broken or not, is only part of the story. For any writer there is also the relationship with other literatures, with the present, with the "human predicament," with the self. This last may be the most important of all, for certain gaps in ourselves may swallow up all the potentiality in the world. A writer according to his personal scope stands in relation to all he can use of man's total literary

> tradition . . . Every writer in the modern world--since he cannot be in all the literary traditions at once--is the inheritor of a gapped, discontinuous, polyglot tradition. I am certain that a great part of the significance of my own past, as I try to write my poetry, is that the past *is* mutilated. (*Tradition and the Irish Writer* 57-66)

In attacking the "Irish" writers' failure to address the cultural fragmentation of the twentieth century, Derek Mahon had obviously not considered figures like Kinsella, not to speak of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. The real provincial in this instance is Mahon, with his yearning toward London as the metropolitan center. (In this respect it is interesting to note that when Joyce and Beckett chose exile from Ireland, they moved not to London, but to the continent, where Beckett always kept his Irish passport up to date, and when asked if he were English replied, "*Au contraire*").

Mahon's cultural confusion seems to stem from his colonial manner of construing the Northern Irish situation. Very instructive in this regard is his comparing the Northern Irish Protestant writer's relation with "the indigenous Catholic Irish" to Camus' relation with the Algerian Muslims. Camus, according to Mahon, located himself at the metropolitan center in Paris and disassociated himself from the Muslim "natives" of his

homeland, and could never settle for being a mere "Algerian" writer.

From his earliest days, Mahon saw in the existential Camus an exemplary figure. As the Troubles broke out in Northern Ireland, he also saw the relevance of the Camusian stance vis à vis historical events in Algeria to the stand he and his fellow Protestant poets were expected to take toward the freedom struggle of their own "natives."

The persistence of Mahon's Camusian identification is evidenced by the poem "Death and the Sun," with which he ends his *Selected Poems*. The arrangement of the poems was done by Mahon himself; he opens with "In Carrowdore Churchyard," his elegy for Louis MacNeice, his chosen poetic father figure. His choice of the Camus poem to close the book suggest that Camus is another centrally important figure to Mahon, both because of Camus' existential philosophy and his historic situation which Mahon parallels with this own:

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

How we read you then, admiring the frank composure
Of a stranger bayed by dogs who could not hear
The interior dialogue of flesh and stone
His life and death a work of art
Conceived in the silence of the heart
. . . . . .

Deprived though we were of his climatic privileges
And raised in a Northern land of rain and muck,
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 had 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 playing wind
. . . .

One cannot look too 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.
> (*Selected Poems* 194)

In spite of its ambitious structure, this poem fails as an artifact, because, in spite of all its sonority, it sounds hollow at the core. The opening stanza sets up a very ambitious framework establishing the parallel lives of Mahon and Camus, mostly through the silent mother figure. The poem proceeds to outline the Ulster youth's admiration for *L'Etranger*, *La peste*, and *La Chute*; Belfast's indigents, on the dole queues, are called Sisyphus' descendants, and a reference is made to a comment of Malraux that these damned workers are "no longer historically significant." To the poet they are appealing as ghosts "shrouded in white dust," their posture seeming to petition rescue. From this moment of focused specificity, the poem moves away from historic reference toward a final vague statement of "rich despair." Plato's Neolithic troglodyte is brought out into confrontation with the real world— "Tangible fact ablaze in a clear light," but the light seems somehow spurious and the reader blinks with the figure staring at the sun, dazzled at the performance of the poem, and the emotional extremity it seems to expose.

In the introduction to his translation of *Selected Poems of Philippe Jaccottet,* Derek Mahon praises Jaccottet's ability "to draw a song from the very limit" (10). In his own Camus poem, Mahon seems to just that; as a song, the poem succeeds, but as an attempt to make sense of the historic stance of either the poet or Camus, the poem is a failure; meaning melts away in such blinding sunlight, and we miss the usual oblique light of Mahon's exquisite verse.

Derek Mahon left Dublin in 1970; his state of mind as he prepared to depart is expressed in "Beyond Howth Head," an epistle to his friend Jeremy Lewis, who had just preceded him into exile. The poem is a gloomy Jeremiad, reflecting Mahon's extensive reading of Irish history and his fascination in particular with Edmund Spenser's stint in Ireland and his take on the "natives." At some points in the poem he seems to align himself with Spenser's paranoia, wishing that he might withdraw like Spenser "far from enemies"; at other points he calls on the Dionysiac forces in the Irish psyche that Spenser found savage and barbarous (and ultimately destructive to his estate) to return to Irish life: "Lewde libertie," whose midnight work/Disturbed the peace of County Cork

> And fired Kilcolman's windows when
> The flower of Ireland looked to Spain,
> Come back and be with us again!
> But take a form that sheds for love

That tight-arsed convent-bred disdain
The whole wide world Knows nothing of;
And flash an *aisling* through the dawn
Where Yeats's hill-men still break stone.
(*Selected Poems* 44)

These lines invite a fresh infusion of liberating vision, a new release of energy, this time social, which will correct the inequalities in contemporary society; "Lewde libertie" is a reference to Edmund Spenser, colonist and Protestant poet, who was awarded his Irish estate, Kilcolman in County Cork, in recognition of his service in the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland.

Among the highlights of this service was the suppression of the Desmond rebellion. In 1579 the Earl of Desmond was declared a traitor and his lands were forfeited; twenty thousand good Munster acres went to the poet and soldier Walter Raleigh, while Spenser received the castle of Kilcolman along with three thousand and twenty eight acres. In 1580 Spenser assisted his friends Sir Walter Raleigh and Lord Grey de Wilton in the siege of the Fort Dun-an-oir in Kerry, where a papal force of seven hundred, landing in Smerwick a bit late to help in the rebellion, were all mercilessly slaughtered even after they surrendered.

Later, in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, written in quieter times at Kilcolman (where Spenser also

wrote *The Fairie Queene*), Spenser was to praise this action at Smerwick as an appropriate way of dealing with Papist treachery. The "salvage condycion" and the "lewde" love of liberty of the "native" Irish led to the burning of Kilcolman during Tyrone's rebellion, which extended to Munster in 1598. In *The Mutabilitie Cantos*, Spenser remarks on this relentless turn of Fortune's wheel:

> What man that sees the euer-whirling wheele
> Of Change, the which all mortal things doth sway
> But that thereby doth find and plainly feel
> How mutability in them doth play
> Her cruell sports, to many men's decay?
> (Canto V1; 1-5)

In calling for a return of the reign of "lewde liberty," Derek Mahon is acting in character, according to Spenser's account of the genealogy of the Mahon name, which, in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, Spenser uses as an example of "degeneracy":

> The Macmaghons in the north were auncientlie Englishe, to witt, descended from the Fitz Vrsulas which was a noble familie in England . . . they themselves for hatred of the Englishe so disguised their names: for at such time as Robart Verde of Oxford was in the Barrons wars against King Richard the second, through the malice of the Peeres,

> banished the Realm and proscribed, he with his kinsman Fitz Vrsulie, fled into Ireland, where being prosecuted, and afterwards in England put to death, his kinsmen there remaining behind in Ireland, rebelled and conspiring with the Irish did quite cast off their Englishe names and allegiance, since which time they have ever so remained, and have sithens been counted mere Irishe.(84-85)

This account of Spenser's implicates the name Mahon in an exemplary alternation of one family name between the states of civility and degeneracy in Irish social history. By forsaking the Norman name Fitz Urse and undergoing a translation to MacMahon (both names mean "son of the bear") Fitz Urse was, according to Spenser's standards, forsaking civility and embracing degenerate barbarity.

To live under the Brehon law and according to Irish cultural customs, was to be labeled a barbarian, and thus a slave, living beyond the law. The only acceptable civility was to live under English law and follow English custom, in other words to become English.

In his Field Day pamphlet *Civilians and Barbarians*, Seamus Deane traces the persistence of this notion through the history of England's dealings with Ireland up to our own day, and concludes:

> Of all the blighting distinctions which govern our responses and limit our imaginations at the moment, none is more potent than this four hundred year-old distinction between barbarians and civilians (14).

"Beyond Howth Head" invokes an *aisling*, a visionary presence, to release a renewed energy in contemporary Irish society, where all life seems to the poet to be bound up in a post-colonial materialism and pseudo-civility; Ireland has got her freedom, but no real spiritual transformation has taken place; the Catholic middle class now rules, and "Yeats's hill-men still break stone." A return of the "barbarians," who "fired Kilcolman's windows when/The flower of Ireland looked to Spain" is what is called for.

Mahon returns to this theme in "Poem Beginning with a line by Cavafy." In Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," the barbarians are a symbol of a force whose coming will give some purpose to the life of the jaded citizens, and there is consternation over the news that the barbarians are not coming after all, that in fact there are no longer any barbarians. The citizens are at a loss: "And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians/ They were, those people, a kind of solution." (*Collected Poems* 19) Cavafy's poem is set in some nonspecific historic imperial location, and the barbarians are not given any description; they are simply

a symbol of the "Other"; Mahon's long-awaited barbarians are, on the other hand, very specifically described: they are the "flower of Ireland," departed since the defeats at Kinsale, Aughrim and the Boyne.

In "Beyond Howth Head," the poet had called to these exiled "barbarians" to return: "Come back and be with us again!" They have been defined as "barbarians" by the English because of their Gaelic language and non-English way of life. Forced into exile when their efforts to recover control of their country failed, Mahon's "Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy" explores the possibility of their return:

> It is night and the barbarians have not come.
> It was not always so hard;
> When the great court flared
> With gallowglasses and language difficulty
> A man could be a wheelwright and die happy.
>
> We remember oatmeal and mutton,
> Harpsong, a fern table for wiping your hands on,
> A candle of reeds and butter,
> The distaste of the rheumatic chronicler,
>
> A barbarous tongue, and herds like cloud-shadow
> Roaming the wet hills
> When the hills were young,
> Whiskey pikemen and their spiky dogs

Preserved in woodcuts and card catalogues.

Now it is night and the barbarians have not come.
Or if they have we only recognize,
harsh as a bombed bathroom,
The frantic anthropologisms
And lazarous ironies behind their talk

Of fitted carpets, central heating
And automatic gear change-
Like the bleached bones of a hare
Or a handful of spent
Cartridges on a deserted rifle range.
(*Poems 1962-1978* 45)

Mahon's barbarians are invested with all the symbolic meaning given to them in Cavafy's poem; by taking the symbol out of the realm of the vague and the ahistoric, Mahon risks losing the universality of its symbolic value, but he finds the risk worth taking because of the historic resonance of the word "barbarian" in an Irish context.

The period of the Elizabethan conquest of Ulster is an imaginative source for Derek Mahon; his "barbarians" come from that era, and their return today would infuse renewed energy and distinction into an Irish way of life where even Yeats's "filthy modern tide" is all cleaned up

and antiseptic. Mahon's imagination escapes to a historic moment full of the tensions of cross-cultural conflict and "language difficulty," where an ordinary workman, instead of installing "fitted carpets" and "central heating," "could be a wheelright and die happy," presumably because the wheelwright would be an essential cog in a dignified way of life, and live in the midst of all the excitement instead of in some awful, depersonalized sixties housing estate like Tallaght, Ballymun or Fatima Mansions.

The cross-cultural aspect of Mahon's mythic golden age of Irish barbarism involves the interplay between the English court of Elizabeth, where the Ulster nobles were expected to present themselves (and where Elizabeth had the courtesy to learn a few words of Irish in order to greet them), the Gaelic way of life in the hills of home, and the intermingling with Gaelic Scotland through the Scots settlers in the Antrim glens and the gallowglass. The gallowglass (*gall-o-glaigh*) were professional soldiers of Scottish extraction; In Ulster, during the time of Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell, gallowglass were an essential component of Gaelic armies. The great court referred to here is probably that of Elizabeth; there are several accounts, in Camden and Holinshed, of Ulster chieftains journeying to the court of Elizabeth as they had journeyed to the court of her father, Henry VIII, with a retinue of woodkerne and gallowglass.

The "rheumatic chronicler," "the whiskey pikemen," and "the spiky dogs" are all connected with scenes of "barbarous" life among the hills of Ulster as depicted by English travelers, including Fynes Morryson and Sir John Harington. These accounts would be preserved in the "card catalogues" of libraries like the one at Trinity College Dublin, where Derek Mahon had been doing a lot of research for a play about Hugh O'Neill around the time this poem was written.

The "woodcuts" were those made by John Derricke for *The Image of Ireland, with a Discovery of Woodkarne*. Derricke had accompanied Sir Henry Sidney (appointed governor of Ireland by Elizabeth in 1565), as he carried out the administration of English policy in Ulster. Two of Derricke's woodcuts are used to illustrate the Renwick edition of Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* with "Outlaws Burning a Farmhouse" and "Rebels Pursued by the Queens Troops." More recently Derrick's woodcuts have been used to illustrate *The Planter and the Gael*, an Arts Council of Northern Ireland publication, containing an anthology of the poems of John Hewitt and John Montague. *The Rough Field*, Montague's long historic poem, also uses Derricke's woodcuts as ironic comment on the written text.

Designating this motley crew of Elizabethan Irish as the long-awaited barbarians, Mahon shows a particular affection for that period in Ulster history; this is

understandable when one considers that those woodcuts, colonist's distorted image though they may be, capture a last moment of Gaelic civilization. It would also appeal to Mahon's ironic imagination that the only image of ourselves we have from that period is that of the colonizer. In the beginning of *Ulysses*, Stephen refers to Irish art as "the cracked looking glass of a servant;" more recently, the contemporary writer Seamus Heaney has pointed out the resemblance of this predicament to the story of Pancho Villa's followers, who, having broken into an oppressive Mexican mansion, see themselves for the first time in the mirror of the colonizer.

Plate III of Derricke's woodcuts shows an Irish Lord feasting in the open air. In his letter to the "goode and gentle reader," Derricke declares that this plate "shews the habits of a people out of the Northe, whose usages I behelde after the fashion there set doune," and continues with a description in verse, which shows deep anti-Catholic prejudice, combined with a grudging admiration for the "cunning art" of the poets and harpists:

> Fryer smelfeast sneaking in,
> doth preace among the best.
> Who play'th in Romish toys the Ape,
> by counterfeiting Paull;
> For which they doe award him then,
> the highest room of all.
> Who being set, because the cheere

is deemed little worth,
Except the same be intermixt
and lac'de with Irish mirth
Both Barde and Harper is preparede,
which by their cunning art
Doe strike and cheer up all the guests
with comfort at the hart (180).

The way of life with the poet of primary importance in Irish society was very near its end when Derricke made this woodcut and wrote his doggerel description, and, with this way of life, a whole cultural identity died.

After the battle of Kinsale, when O'Donnell fled to Spain, and O'Neill to Rome, Aindrais MacMarcuis, the last bard of the O'Neills, voiced the Irish people's lament at this loss in his poem "Anocht is uaigneach Eire" ("Tonight Ireland is Left Desolate"):

Anocht is uaigneach Éire,
do-bheir fógra a firfhréimhe
gruaide a fear 's a fionnbhan fliuch,
treabh is iongnadh go huaigneach.

Ag triall gan locadh tar lear
uainn do roighnibh mac Míleadh;
gé daoineach aon fhádbhuig fhinn,
fágbhaid gan aoinneach Éirinn.

Gan gáire fá ghníomhaibh linbh,
cosg ar cheol, glas ar Ghaoidhilg,
mic ríogh, mar nach dual don dream,
gan luadh ar fhíon ná ar aifreann.

Gan rádha rithlearg molta,
gan scaoileadh sceol gcodlata,
gan úidh ar fhaicsin leabhair,
gan chloistin nglúin gheinealaigh

Ní fhuil díobh fear a hiomchair
d'éis ar imthigh d'Éirionnchaibh;
ríoghraidh Bhanbha fá bhroid troim
ag goid ar n-anma asainn.
(*Field Day Anthology* 279)

Man after man, day after day
Her noblest princes pass away
And leave to all the rabble rest
A land dispeopled of her best

. . . .

Her chiefs are gone. There's none to bear
Her cross or lift her from despair;
The grieving lords take ship. With these
Our very souls pass overseas.
(*English Version: Robin Flower*)

In Derek Mahon's "Poem Beginning with a Line from Cavafy," the barbarians fail to arrive, or if they have come, they are hardly distinguishable from the descendants of "the rabble rest," that is, the people who stayed behind. Like the vapid suburbanites who now dominate Irish social life, their talk is "Of fitted carpets, central heating/And automatic gear change"; it seems that Spenser's barbarians have all become civilians, or have at least camouflaged themselves as such very cleverly for their own subtle ironic reasons. Unless, behind all this consumerist talk and deadly civility, the poet can detect surviving traces of an authentic "barbarous" consciousness, evidence as difficult to recognize as "the bleached bones of a hare."

"Poem Beginning With a Line From Cavafy" is Mahon's version of Yeats's "September 1913"; romantic Ireland is dead and gone, replaced by the consumerism of the "greasy till." No Mahon equivalent of "Easter 1916" is possible because it is too difficult to see "a terrible beauty" in the IRA of today, with its actions as "harsh as a bombed bathroom." The poem's conclusion leaves us in the dark night of the Irish soul, with no arrival of redemption in any form one would want to recognize.

The sense of being at the end of history, in an extreme state of desolate alienation, pervades much of Mahon's poetry. Not willing to give up hope entirely, the poems search for mythic meaning in everyday life.

Affirming the persistence of the human need for myth and ritual, Mahon seeks to find in myth a mode of structuring the chaotic turmoil of his life and times. In her *Ancient Myth and Modern Poetry,* Lilian Feder points out that the contemporary use of myth shows both its continuing vitality and the contemporary poet's ability to adapt its uses to inform the quest for pattern in his inner life and his relation to the world around him. Speaking of "poets for whom myth is as much a self-revealing instrument as it is a traditional and continuing language" Feder quotes Susanne Langer's statement that the purpose of myth "is moral orientation, not escape," and goes on to attribute the value of myth to its ability to enact human conflict and man's need "to comprehend his own history and to discover some meaning and order in its record of violence and failure." (416)

Mahon, like Yeats in "Byzantium," seeks in myth "those images that yet/Fresh images beget," in order to give rhythm and pattern to the deep and persistent yearnings of contemporary life; Mahon's villanelle "The Andean flute" exemplifies the poet's imagination being fired up by a chance glimpse of the numinous in everyday life:

The Andean Flute

He dances to that music in the wood

As if history were no more than a dream.
Who said the banished gods were gone for good?

The furious rhythm creates a manic mood,
piercing the twilight like a mountain stream
He dances to that music in the wood

We might have put on Bach or Buxtehude,
But a chance impulse chose the primal scream.
Who said the banished gods were gone for good?

An Inca frenzy fires his northern blood
His child-heart picking up the tribal beam,
He dances to that music in the wood

A puff of snow bursts where the birches brood;
Along the lane the earliest snowdrops gleam.
Who said the banished gods were gone for good?

It is the ancient cry for warmth and food
That moves him. Acting out an ancient theme
He dances to that music in the wood
Who said the banished gods were gone for good?
(*Selected Poems* 134)

In *Essays and Introductions,* Yeats asks how much of "the ecstatic dancers among the hills and woods must one

imagine in an ideal man of genius" (184); "The Andean Flute" answers the question by its sheer joy over containing in the elegant movements of the villanelle (which originated as a dance-song) the ecstatic form of the ritualized dance— the magic beyond measure of a movement that unites a Northern Irish child with the spirit of the Incas. How essential Derek Mahon considers this Dionysiac spirit to both poetic and public life is evidenced in his recent translation of *The Bacchae* of Euripides. In his introduction to *The Bacchae,* Mahon points out the importance of allowing this Dionysiac energy a proper place of respect in society: Pentheus becomes an emblem of the too rational leader of a state that suppresses and punishes expressions of the Dionysiac dimension of joyous play, with dire consequences for himself and society.

This unhealthy repression and denial, prevalent in Ireland both North and South (the censorship laws and repressive power of the Catholic church in the South, and in the North the ethos of the "tied up swings") is, obliquely, the preoccupation of much of Mahon's writing. In his poems about members of his family he concentrates on the ones who counter this repression. By praising the ones who like to rock the boat and to exult in making mischief, Mahon adds to the gaiety of life as well as revealing his deep affection for the particularities of his Northern heritage. "My Wicked Uncle" celebrates the

uncle who claims to have been "The crookedest chief steward in the Head Line" and whose stories of his exploits are not necessarily to be believed:

> And once, so he would say,
> Sailing from San Francisco to Shanghai
> He brought a crew of lascars out on strike
> In protest at the loss of a day's pay
> Crossing the International Dateline.
> (*Poems 1962-1978* 6)

The grandfather in the poem of that name is beloved for surely being "up to no good" even in old age:

> They brought him in on a stretcher from the world,
> Wounded but humorous. And he soon recovered.
> Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled
> Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood
> Only he can recapture. Even on cold
> Mornings he is up at six with a block of wood
> Or a box of nails, discreetly up to no good. (5)

The sense of a past that will be unrecoverable when these "wicked" ones die is present in both these poems, and emerges in an elegiac tone that is "wounded but humorous." Laid out for burial, the uncle is perceived

for the first time, sundered from "his salesman's dash": "that night I saw my uncle as he really was." This first real encounter is followed by a sense of irretrievable loss, "as the gradual graph of my uncle's life/and times dipped precipitately/Into the black earth of Carnmoney Cemetery." But a sense of continuity is also affirmed: "His teenage kids are growing horns and claws-/More wicked already than ever my uncle was."

The last stanza of "Grandfather" shows the elusive nature of his character to be emblematic of the stubborn life-force in those Northern recalcitrants who have perfected the strategy of turning a deaf ear to any call for change:

> Never there when you call. But after dark
> You hear his great boots thumping in the hall
> And in he comes, as cute as they come. Each night
> His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock
> against the future, then his light goes out.
> Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all.
> (*Poems 1962-1978* 5)

Mahon's ideal society would make room for all such varieties of wickedness as well as for the impulse expressed in such republican myths as that of the IRA man on the run. His ironic poem "As It Should Be" exposes the Pentheus-like fervor of a state which tries to repress

this impulse, rather than remedy the situation producing it. The poem was inspired by a reading of Denis Johnston's play *The Moon in the Yellow River*, in which an IRA man of the civil war era, when asked what motivated him, enigmatically quoted the Chinese poet Li Po.

As It Should Be

We hunted the mad bastard
Through bog, moorland, rock, to the star-lit west
And gunned him down in a blind yard
Between ten sleeping lorries
And an electric generator.

Let us hear no idle talk
Of the moon in the yellow river.
The air blows softer since his departure.

Since his tidal 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 as they grow up
to a world with method in it.
(*Poems 1962-1978* 46)

For the poet "idle talk/ Of the moon in the yellow river" is of vital importance; it is the realm of poetry, which can sometimes, as the Mahon poem "Bird Sanctuary" does, hold out a dream of a world "beyond reason, beyond rhyme." Mahon's poetic instincts recoil from the repressive strangulation techniques of "a world with method in it" when it excludes so much else; such a world may be regulated on the surface by the standards of neatness and bureaucratic order, but deep down it can be all about control and creating its own world-order.

The poem "Courtyards in Delft" is an exposé of the order-obsessed state of mind. In his meditation on this theme, Mahon contemplates the 1659 painting of courtyards in Delft by the Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch. Mahon makes the connection between the mentality depicted in this painting and the mind-set behind the Dutch colonial expansion into South Africa as well as the invasion of Ireland by the Dutch William of Orange, who left behind residues of the cultural values depicted in the painting, contributing to the atmosphere in which young Mahon grew up:

Courtyards in Delft

Oblique light on the trite, on brick and tile-
Immaculate masonry, and everywhere that
Watertap, 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
Perfection 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 dikes admit the esurient sea;
Yet this is life too, and the cracked
Outhouse door a verifiable fact
As visibly mnemonic as the sunlit
Railings that front the houses opposite.

I lived there as a boy and know the coal
Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon
Lambency informing the deal table,

The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.
I must be lying low in a room there,
A strange child with a taste for verse,
While my hard-nosed companions dream of fire
And sword upon parched veldt
And fields of rain-swept gorse. (*Selected Poems* 120)

The first two stanzas of "Courtyards in Delft" emphasize what is excluded by such a thrifty arrangement of "the trite"; everything is "immaculate," suggesting the imposition of a supernatural state of purity, and leaving so much to be desired. "No breeze/Ruffles the trim composure of those trees." The sort of breeze that disturbs composure, the breath of inspiration breaking into the "modest but adequate" banality of the everyday, is ruled out by this picture. Missing also are the "random," the "lewd," all those things that might "mar" such "chaste perfection," and admit what Yeats called "the wasteful virtues" that "earn the sun." What is missing most of all is the *Eros* of abundance, as depicted in Botticelli's pen-and-ink drawing that Mahon chose for the cover of his *Poems 1962-1978*. These first stanzas of "Courtyards in Delft" expose a stunted, unpleasant side of the puritanical zeal of a Protestant work-ethic. In her essay "No More Poems About Paintings?" Edna Longley remarks on the "sins of omission and omission of sins"

dwelt on by Mahon in these beginning stanzas (*The Living Stream* 243).

In "North Wind: Portrush," Mahon contrasts the bohemian gaiety of French impressionism, with the dour negativity of his own *paysage moralisé*:

> Elsewhere the olive grove,
> *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*,
> Poppies and parasols,
> Blue skies and mythic love.
> Here only the stricken souls
> No spring can unperturb
> (*Selected Poems* 125)

The north wind as it blows in Portrush is described as working itself into the mind "like the high keen of a lost /Lear spirit in agony"; this bleak Protestant landscape is, however, soul-scape for Mahon; "North Wind: Portrush" concludes by admitting the deep obsessive attraction the aesthetics of that voice holds for his own imaginative spirit: for him "That weird, plaintive voice/Choirs now and forever." (*Selected Poems* 124)

In a similar fashion, "Courtyards in Delft," having exposed the negative, life-denying side of the picture, subtly shifts perspective in the third stanza, as recognition begins to dawn that he is contemplating the imaginatively radiant nesting placè of his own childhood.

The language of the poem begins to change; the woman with her back to us in de Hooch's painting becomes an Ulster woman waiting for "her man to come home to his tea"; the steady loyalty of her posture elicits a new note of affirmation from the poet "Yet this is life too." The cracked outhouse door lets a ray of numinous sunlight enter the poem, and its lines become filled with images of light, the coal "glittering" in its shed, the "lambency" of the deal table, and the exquisite cameo of "the ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon."

The last lines of the poem introduce us to Bachelardian poetics of an intimate interior space, which is the poet's childhood room. Here Mahon learns poetically "what is meant by home," and his affective sense embraces "the ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon" as an intimate mimetic space— an original source of his poetry, even as his moral sense creates a distance between "the strange child with a taste for verse" and the "hard-nosed companions" preoccupied with imperialist dreams of conquest on the South African veldt and on fields of Irish gorse. In her essay "Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland" Edna Longley, noticing the subtle shift from censure to a compulsion to reveal the beloved intimacy of the inner space in this poem, comments:

> This interior, reluctantly appreciated as well as hated . . . both defines and exemplifies the subtle

> posture of Mahon's poetry, not just in relation to Northern Irish Protestantism but to the whole world of political action . . . Those occasions on which Mahon relents thus carry [all the] more conviction (*Poetry in the Wars* 203-204).

The version of this poem published in Mahon's *The Hunt by Night* in 1982, contained an added last stanza that spelled out in more detail the punitive expansiveness contained behind the pale light of de Hooch's painting:

> 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.
> (*The Hunt By Night* 10)

The lines of the map weave Ulster, famous producer of linen, into a web of complicity with the mapping mania of the colonial enterprise. Mahon's approval of the Dionysiac energy which disrupts that over-rationalized order is evidenced once again in the "if only" of the

last lines. The crockery-smashing *Maenads* would wreak havoc on the teatime tidiness of de Hooch's world: unfortunately, this last stanza upsets the careful order of the poem (of course this may be precisely what it is meant to do); its need to spell out what was already subtly stated in the shorter version reduces the powerful impact and balanced ambivalence created by the tensions of belonging and alienation in the original version of the poem. Mahon's *Selected Poems*, published in 1991, prints the shorter version and, perhaps wisely, omits the additional last stanza.

The intricacies of differing perspectives in "Courtyards in Delft" are held in balance—the detached aesthetic observer of a work of art, the child inhabitor of a space within the work, and the same child "lying low" to avoid the contamination of collusion with "hard-nosed companions" with their dreams of war.

The way in which Mahon's sense of his relation to Irish history and tradition insinuates itself into his way of seeing a work of art is again evident in "The Hunt by Night" and "Girls on the Bridge." "The Hunt by Night" is Mahon's meditation on Paolo Uccello's painting, known by that name, done in 1465 and now hanging in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The poem contemplates the manner in which civilized man has stylized the basic human instincts, the howls and murderous cries when "man the maker killed to live," transmuting all to the

"pageantry" of the hunting horn. The Lascaux cave drawings of bison have emerged out of the "neolithic bush" to become

> The midnight woods
> Of nursery walls
> The ancient fears mutated
> To play, horses to rocking-horses
> Tamed and framed to courtly uses
> . . . .
> The glade aglow
> with pleasant mysteries

Such products of civilization as Uccello's painting conceal the real nature of man's wild and raw pursuit of power over the course of history; the perspective of the painting has the dogs and horsemen receding so that the end point of the chase is "Masked by obscurities of paint," reducing the hunt to "some elaborate/Spectacle put on for fun," and not the relentless nightmare of man's inhumanity to man and beast.

"Girls on the Bridge" is exemplary of Mahon's way of affirming the specificity and soul-scape of a fellow artist's work, while at the same time transforming the subject into his own vision of reality. *Girls on the Bridge,* painted by Edvard Munch in 1901, depicts three young girls standing on a bridge in Kristiana; the girls stare at the sure facts of their surroundings—houses,

trees, sky, as well as each other— reflected in the mysterious depths of the darkening water flowing under the bridge.

In Mahon's poem the location of the bridge is, in his imagining, transferred to Antrim, where he spent his teenage holidays, often observing just such a scene of girls on the bridge in Cushendun. The solid two-story house surrounded by trees in Munch's picture bears a remarkable resemblance to a planter's farmhouse in the North of Ireland. What Mahon focuses on in his poem is that the details of landscape in Munch's painting *The Scream* place it not very far from where the girls stand, oblivious of the future horror history holds:

Girls on the Bridge

Audible trout,
Notional midges. Beds,
Lamplight and crisp linen, wait
In the house there for the sedate
Limbs and averted heads
Of the girls out

Late on the bridge.
The dusty road that slopes
Past is perhaps the main road south,

. . . . . .

Grave daughters
Of time, you lightly toss
Your hair as the long shadows grow
And night begins to fall. Although
Your laughter calls across the
The dark waters,

A ghastly sun
Watches in pale dismay.
Oh, you may laugh, being as you are
Fair sisters of the evening star,
But wait- if not today
A day will dawn

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...
(*Selected Poems* 173)

Mahon's contemplation of Munch's painting is full of a sense of predestination and foreboding; the poem seems to be written in a mood of retrospective musing, with memories of his teen years in the late fifties, cycling

in the Antrim hills, staying in the youth hostel in Cushendal or a caravan in Cushendun. The poem "Bicycles" in *Autobiographies* captures the exuberance of the sense of freedom of those days, before the Northern Troubles erupted and the landscape overlapped with the landscape of *The Scream*:

> There was a bicycle, a fine
> Raleigh with five gears
> And racing handle bars.
> It stood at the front door
> Begging to be mounted
>
> 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.
>
> Soon there were long rides
> In the country, wet weekends
> Playing snap in the kitchens
> Of mountain youth-hostels
> (*Selected Poems* 88)

For Mahon, as for Munch, "The Girls on the Bridge" depicts a moment of respite, its quivering quiet catching

the soft evening light; it is a moment in which the girls, gazing into the reflective water, leave the depths unplumbed, and so keep their peace of mind. The poet, however, "conceived beyond such innocence" and with the benefit of hindsight,. shows an awareness of the troubled waters that the future holds.

The poem calls the young girls "Grave daughters of time"; the scene reinforces Mahon's sense of what he calls in "The Studio" (originally called "Edvard Munch") "the life-price of time"; throughout the poem he holds the horrible closeness of Munch's other picture in mind, where the "ghastly sun," pale yellow, turns red like clotted blood, and becomes *The Scream*.

The Irish tradition to which Derek Mahon finally belongs is that of Samuel Beckett; they both share a bleak but not hopeless vision of reality, with a deeply religious sense of the transitoriness of time, and the fragility of earthly existence. Mahon's poem "An Image From Beckett" moves from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, celebrating the brief moment of man's earthly tenure. The poem was inspired by Beckett's "we give birth astride a grave." The landscape of the poem is, of course, the Antrim coast, and the poem is a hymn to its bleak beauty. In this poem Mahon places himself in his home landscape, which is a symbol of the brevity and fragility of any one person's time on the earth, a brief moment situated

between the time of the prehistoric occupants and the future inheritors; its lines define the light in which he regards heritage and history:

An Image From Beckett

In that instant
There was a sea, far off
As bright as lettuce

A northern landscape
And a huddle
Of houses along the shore.

Also, I think, a white
Flicker of gulls
And washing hung to dry-

The poignancy of those
Back yards- and the grave digger
Putting aside his forceps.

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

I was struck by the
Sweetness and light
The sweetness and light,

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

With a subliminal batsqueak
Of reflex lamentation.
Our knuckle bones

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 glimmer of wintry light,
There is No-one to blame.

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

> The uprightness of its
> Utilities and schoolchildren-
> To whom in my will,
> This, I have left my will.
> I hope they have time,
> And light enough, to read it
> (*Selected Poems* 34-35).

Mahon's poetic will is his attempt to forge a microcosm in his poetry; it is the world discovered beyond the cultural ruptures of his historic moment, a world that finds its appropriate imagery in the Antrim hills, bleak, but at moments suffused with light; as Beckett, in his essay "An Imaginative Work," points out, "The end, the beginning, is among the hills, where imagination is not banned" (*Disjecta* 96). Though Beckett made that statement when discussing the painting of Jack B. Yeats, it applies equally well to Mahon's artistic *praxis,* as do Beckett's further comments on Jack Yeats's work: "He brings light, as only the great dare bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence" (97).

In the midst of the troubled moment in Irish history out of which he writes, Mahon enables us, by means of his poetry, to lift our eyes to the hills, and be grateful for glimmers of light. In *Explorations*, William Butler Yeats tells us that, in the long run, it is the artist of

a nation "who becomes its image in the minds of posterity, and even though he represents no man of worth in his art, the worth of his own mind becomes the inheritance of his people" (192). It is in this light that we read the testament of Derek Mahon's poetry.

Chapter Three

Northern "Rights on the English Lyric"

Preoccupations, Seamus Heaney's first book of essays, explores the Northern poet's relation "to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world"(13). These explorations are inevitably inter-linked: the poetic voice speaks out of a place already endowed with a heritage, and the voice also speaks from a specific place in time, within the contemporary world. In speaking of his childhood place, between Mossbawn and Castledawson, in County Derry, Heaney expresses the entanglements of roots and loyalties embedded in his origin:

> This was the country of community, it was also the realm of division. Like the rabbit pads that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. In the names of its fields and townlands, in their mixture of Scots and Irish and English etymologies, this side of the country was redolent of the history of its owners. Broagh, The Long Rigs, Bell's Hill;

Brian's Field, the Round Meadow, the Demesne; each name was a kind of love made to each acre" (20).

Heaney, in embracing these acres, and the differing histories inscribed in their names, is embracing as his own in an affirmative the linguistic heritage implicated in those names. Later, grown up and living in Belfast after the Troubles had erupted, Heaney's sense of place is complicated by the task of unraveling the weary and twisted emotions brought on by the violence and suffering. Stopped at a road-block by the English Army, Heaney comments, "it hasn't been named martial law but that's what it feels like"(32). Heaney's response is to outface such outrage with poetic self-assertion. In his poem "The Ministry of Fear," dedicated to Seamus Deane, he reminisces about their mutual pursuit of poetry in a context as bleak as that of Edgar and Lear on the heath: "Here's two on's are sophisticated,/Dabbling in verses till they have become a life," and goes on to confide:

> They once read my letters at a roadblock
> And shone their torches on your hieroglyphics,
> "Svelte dictions" in a very florid hand.
>
> Ulster was British, but with no rights on
> The English lyric: all around us though
> We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear
> (*North* 63-65).

The English lyric, Heaney here declares, is a territory to which he and his fellow Northern poets are going to claim the rights. This is a declaration of intent, and how true Heaney was to his word is evidenced by the most recent edition of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, which is dominated by the work of Heaney, Mahon, Muldoon, and their fellow Northern writers.

Tracing the intricacies of Ulster's link with the English lyric leads back to Elizabethan times and to Ireland's exposure to the works of such poets as Spenser, Raleigh, and Sidney, not only as writers of exquisite English lyrics but also as poets involved in the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland.

The confrontation between the Gaelic Ulster of Hugh O'Neill of Tyrone and the *conquistador* Elizabethans changed the face of Ulster both linguistically and ecologically. The Gaelic way of life was destroyed, its demise effected, in Heaney's words in *Preoccupations*,

> by soldiers and administrators like Spenser and Davies, [its] lifeline bitten through when the squared off walls of bawn and demesne dropped on the country like the jaws of a man-trap. (36)

This traumatic introduction of the Elizabethan literary tradition to Ulster has resulted in a particular obsession with that historic moment in the writings of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and John Montague.

All three focus particularly on the figure of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone from 1550 to 1616, who, in some way, symbolizes the Irish predicament of attempting to negotiate a relationship with the conquering culture. The fact that the language they write in is English demonstrates the effectiveness of the conquest, while their ongoing refusal of assimilation to the English tradition demonstrates the persistent need for strategies of resistance. In this area Hugh O'Neill is exemplary; his attraction as a symbolic figure for Northern poets is similar to the fascination he held for Sean O'Faolain, who wrote the biography *The Great O'Neill,* and for Brian Friel, whose play, *Making History,* focuses on the period of O'Neill's life after his defeat at the battle of Kinsale in 1601.

Sean O'Faolain, in the preface to *The Great O'Neill,* sums up the reasons for the mythic stature of O'Neill among Irish writers:

> Hugh O'Neill has a traditional fame in Ireland which has long challenged a biography. I undertook his biography in that spirit, attracted by the story of the man's ancestry, of his education in England, of his sudden rise to power, of his considerable wiliness in diplomacy, by certain romantic incidents in his private life, by his alleged cunning preparations for war against England, by his seven

> years defiance of a series of able English generals, and, above all, by the tradition that he represents the last stand of the old Gaelic World (v-vi).

For Northern poets, while the old territorial wars are being fought all over again in Ulster, the figure of O'Neill has a special pertinence. What is of particular interest for the present purpose is the manner in which the various facets of O'Neill's character, as outlined in the preceding quotation from O'Faolain, are parceled out among the poets, each selecting what best suits his poetic stance in the current historic situation. Montague, enacting his version of Ulster's *mythistorema* in *The Rough Field*, is particularly interested in O'Neill's connection to his home place, Tyrone, and what O'Faolain refers to as "the last stand of the old Gaelic world"; Heaney, an international figure with enormous stature in the contemporary literary world, is preoccupied with O'Neill's negotiating skills and his precarious position in between the cultures of nature and nurture. Mahon is interested in what O'Faolain describes as O'Neill's "English education," and the cultural intricacies arising from the seven years that O'Neill spent being fostered in the Sidney household in England. The irony of O'Neill, with his English education, his obstinate defense of the old Gaelic order, and his conflicting loyalties brought about by his friendship

with those "skilled generals" Elizabeth sent to defeat him, appeals to Mahon's ironic sense of his own stance in the contemporary cultural wars being fought out in Ireland.

Montague's "A Lost Tradition," Heaney's "Terminus," and Mahon's fragment of a planned O'Neill play, as well as his poems "Rathlin" and "Penshurst" represent their authors' particular preoccupations with O'Neill and with history. In his introduction to the *Book of Irish Verse*, John Montague, discussing the growth of Irish poetry in the English language, notes that English as a language, though present in Ireland since the Norman invasion, "kept shrinking back to the Pale" (that area around Dublin where English Law held sway), until the defeat at Kinsale and the subsequent Plantation of Ulster. Thereafter English began its slow and relentless displacement of Irish as the literary language of the Irish people.

Montague goes on to lament the fact that "so many of the best Elizabethan poets, like Raleigh and Sir John Davies, assisted at the destruction of a society which produced a poetry so akin to their own." Montague is here referring to Norman-Gaelic poets like Pierce Ferriter and Gerald Fitzgerald, whose lyrics reflected the influence of the Provencal *amour courtois*, and the goliardic spirit for which the Gaelic tradition shows such affinity. Seamus Heaney, too, in his essay in response to the

publication of *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, points out the way in which the Gaelic poetry by O'Neill's time had absorbed continental influences and praises the scholar Seán Ó Túama for the act of cultural retrieval represented by his selection:

> Part of Ó'Túama's contribution to our critical perspectives has been to establish links between the tradition of poetry in Irish and the medieval *amour courtois* convention in Europe. It would remind us that the *langue d'oc* is part of the langue of *is agus tá*. ÓTúama's Renaissance is Mediterranean, full of sunlight and vernacular energy, not the black-capped, Latin-lipped one that stares out of Holbein. I can imagine him, for example, linking Ó Rathaille's pride with Dante's, pointing up their common bitterness and loss, their sense of exile from the first good world, and indeed it is salutary to be able to conceive of Ó Rathaille's rawness of feeling, his partisan fury and his bare-handed single combat with the ruin of his times as a pattern of poetic fate and not entirely an aberration and deprivation. Too often English poetry . . . forces itself into the mind as the norm against which everything is measured (*The Government of the Tongue* 31-32).

At the time of the Elizabethan conquest, Gaelic culture was still surviving in Ulster: its necessarily defensive posture sapped too much of its energy, however, and we will never know what it might have achieved if it did not have to deal with systematic annihilation by its nearest neighbor.

In his "Lament for the O'Neills," John Montague extends his sense of "communal loss" to assuage not just the Irish but also the long human procession of "anonymous suffering," including all under the comforting mantle of the poem. The conclusion of the poem returns to Montague's obsessive sense of Ireland's cultural loss, at the moment when O'Neill, accompanied by the cream of Gaelic leadership, turned his back on Ireland:

> Disappearance & death
> of a world, as down Lough Swilly
> the great ship, encumbered with nobles,
> swells its sails for Europe:
> The flight of the Earls
> (*Selected Poems* 107).

In "A Lost Tradition," Montague muses on the linguistic and topological implications of the cultural rupture brought about by O'Neill's defeat. The perspective of the poem is the effect all this has on the contemporary poet who tries to recuperate "shards" of the lost tradition,

and create what Hugh Mac Diarmid called "a poetry of total recall":

> All around, shards of a lost tradition:
> From the Rough Field I went to school
> In the Glen of the Hazels. Close by
> Was the bishopric of the Golden Stone;
> The cairn of Carleton's lonesome poem.
>
> Scattered over the hills, tribal
> And placenames, uncultivated pearls.
> No rock or ruin, dun or dolmen
> But showed memory defying cruelty
> Through an image-encrusted name.
>
> . . . .
>
> The whole landscape a manuscript
> We had lost the skill to read,
> A part of our past disinherited;
> But fumbled like a blind man,
> Along the fingertips of instinct.
>
> . . . .
>
> *Tir Eoghan*: Land of Owen,
> Province of the O'Neill;
> The ghostly tread of O'Hagan's
> Barefoot gallowglasses marching
> To merge forces in Dun Geanainn

Push southward to Kinsale!
Loudly the war-cry is swallowed
In swirls of black rain and fog
As Ulster's pride, Elizabeth's foemen,
Founder in a Munster bog.
(*The Rough Field* 34-35)

Montague tries to pick up "where the last bard of the O'Neills left Off." However, because of all the fissures and seismic changes brought about by the loss of one language and the substitution of another, as well as by other major cultural upheavals in the three and a half centuries since the Plantation of Ulster, the poem is a chronicle of loss and failure, as well as an imaginative coming to terms with a past to which we cannot return, but which we must poetically remember. The transformation of the trauma of the past into poetic form is best achieved in smaller poems within *The Rough Field*, such as in "Like Dolmens Round my Childhood the Old People":

Ancient Ireland indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,

Until once, in a standing circle of stones
I felt their shadows pass

Into the dark permanence of ancient forms
(*The Rough Field* 17).

The persistent search for sources of the fractured troubled present of Ulster in the Irish past, often seems frustrating and futile to poets like Montague, but the material chooses him; the severed head and the unsutured wound of cultural mutilation give utterance through the voice of the poet:

(Dumb
bloodied, the severed
head now chokes to
speak another tongue:-

As in
a long suppressed dream,
some stuttering garb-
led ordeal of my own)
(*The Rough Field* 39)

Montague's early poem "A Chosen Light" had described the kind of lyric poetry he wanted to write, a poetry that would cast on the simplest objects a light, "soft but

luminously exact"(*Selected Poems* 46). His troubled history, however, demanded a less detached form, and poems like "The Grafted Tongue," extracted above, come from a place deep in the psyche, giving voice to personal and communal pain.

In *The Government of the Tongue*, Seamus Heaney, speaking of moments of crisis, personal and historical, "where the ground might open under the present," states that such moments give rise to deep stirrings within the self of "unformed needs and impulses." Heaney quotes Martin Buber's elaboration on this state in *I and Thou:*

> This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work . . . the man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises (*Government of the* Tongue, 117).

A poetry that attempts to come to grips with the psychic wounds still festering in the self as an outcome of personal and communal history needs to find its form in a language of myth and archetype. This is the source of O'Neill's appeal to Montague, Heaney, and Mahon; each remakes him in his own poetic image: for Montague, he wears the insignia of past greatness but also of failure

and loss, leaving the poet haunted and desolate in a psychic landscape described in the elegiac coda of *The Rough Field*:

> Harsh landscape that haunts me,
> Well and stone, in the bleak moors of dream
> With all my circling a failure to return
> to what is already gone (83).

For Seamus Heaney, Hugh O'Neill is a symbol not of loss, but of strategic survival. Heaney, hard pressed under the burden of fame, and caught between the calls of his poetry and the calls of his clan, looks to Hugh O'Neill as exemplar of astute diplomacy and charismatic leadership. Out of history and legend, O'Neill answers to a mythic need of the poet in the reality of his era.

Wallace Stevens, in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," defines poetic reality as "the life that is lived in the scene that it composes"; for the poet this imaginative space is achieved by resisting the pressures of "life in a state of violence"; the poet's strategies of resistance include countering the violence without by a "violence within." Stevens concludes:

> It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems in the last analysis to have some thing to do with our self-preservation;

> and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives *(The Necessary Angel* 23).

Resistance to the pressures of the political reality of Northern Ireland has made of Seamus Heaney, by Stevens' definition, an exemplary "noble rider" of the winged steed of poetry; the need to be simultaneously engaged and detached has created a constant pressure in Heaney's poetry for the past twenty years. During his tenure as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Seamus Heaney gave fifteen public lectures. Of these, both the inaugural lecture, "The Redress of Poetry," and the concluding address, "Frontiers of Writing," make references to the Wallace Stevens essay extracted above. As public poet, Heaney felt more and more the pressures to become a public advocate: this would reduce him to fitting "the well-known papist propagandist" label that Ian Paisley had taunted him with in 1969, before Heaney moved to Dublin to avoid the death threats he received.

To enable him imaginatively to absorb the opposing pressures from people and from poetry, Heaney has foraged in myth and history to find objective correlatives of his emotional state. The figure of Mad Sweeney in *Sweeney Astray* served such a purpose: Heaney's version of *Buile Suibne* translates the story of the seventh-century king

into an allegory of his own predicament. He states this clearly in his introduction:

> Insofar as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as a quarrel between free imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation (V111).

Heaney's later poem "Terminus" again dramatizes the figure of the poet, and the extremities he must negotiate, because of his historic and cultural position. The title of the poem invokes the god of boundaries and explores the suspicion of duality inevitable in negotiating his borderline situation:

Terminus

1
When I hoked there, I would find
An acorn and a rusted bolt.

If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought
I would have second thoughts?

2
When they spoke of the prudent squirrel's hoard
It shone like gifts at a nativity.

When they spoke of the mammon of iniquity
The coins in my pockets reddened like stove-lids

3
Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his kernes.
(*Hailstones* 16)

In the conclusion of "Terminus," the poet is identified with Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, who

actually parlayed in this fashion with Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, in 1599. Richard C. McCoy, in his study of Elizabethan chivalry, *The Rites of Knighthood,* describes Essex's departure for Ireland to defeat O'Neill:

> when he acquired the command of the Irish expedition, he led forth an immense army consisting of sixteen thousand foot soldiers and thirteen hundred cavalry . . . Once in Ireland Essex conducted a weak and ineffective campaign (96).

The year before Essex set out for Ireland, Hugh O'Neill had managed to unite the various Scots and Irish factions in Ulster to defeat the encroaching English army, led by Sir Henry Bagenal. This defeat angered Elizabeth to the extent that she was determined to eliminate Hugh O'Neill, her former protégé. Essex, accompanied by the largest army ever sent against Ireland, set out to accomplish this task.

O'Neill, however, with amazing diplomatic skill, convinced Essex to negotiate rather than engage in battle. The meeting of the two noble riders, the "earl[s] on horseback" of Heaney's poem, is described in Volume Three of Richard Bagwell's study *Ireland Under the Tudors*. In response to the message from O'Neill requesting a parley, Essex replied:

> "meet me in the field so far advanced beyond the head of his kerne as myself shall be separated from the front of my troops, where we will parley in that fashion as best becometh soldiers." Next day O'Hagan on O'Neill's behalf suggested that Essex should meet Tyrone on the Lagan at the ford of Bellaclinthe, the project being that they should converse across the water. The place proved too wide, but Tyrone rode into the stream up to his horses belly, while Essex remained on the bank . . .Thus for half an hour they talked alone (342).

In a time of Anglo-Irish talks, or for the most part "talks about talks," in the news every day in Ireland, this image of O'Neill, willing to plunge into the deep midstream waters in the interest of negotiating a space for peace, held great appeal for Heaney. O'Neill, like Heaney, "grew up in between." According to O'Faolain's biography, Sir Henry Sidney took Hugh O'Neill away from his Irish foster parents, the O'Hagans, when he was about nine years old. Wishing to educate him in English "civilitie", Sidney brought O'Neill to England, where he became a part of the Sidney household at Penshurst. This fair fostering is like the Northern poets' exposure to the English literary tradition, especially the Elizabethan lyric, perfected by the circle around Sir Philip Sidney.

As Heaney identifies with O'Neill, imaginatively becoming the "last earl on horseback," he is identifying, too, with all the intricacies of the power relations O'Neill had to negotiate in that treacherous era. Essex, (for whose sister, Penelope Devereux, Sidney had written *Astrophel and Stella)* was, very soon after his talk with O'Neill, to venture into deep (hot) water himself, hurrying back to England to privately talk with the queen, with disastrous results. The failure of Essex to vanquish O'Neill infuriated Elizabeth, who now considered O'Neill quite beyond the pale. In spite of the delicate nurture he received, he had bitten the hand that nurtured him. Shakespeare had not yet written *The Tempest,* but Prospero's words on hearing of the "foul conspiracy" of Caliban must echo Elizabeth's outrage when she thought of O'Neill's Ulster wars:

> A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
> Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
> Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost
> (IV 1;189-192).

When Heaney had proclaimed the English lyric, a heritage to which Ulster poets could claim a right, he was entering into complicity with Hugh O'Neill, who also tried to have it both ways, living in the best of both worlds; at home as the O'Neill, to the English as Earl of

Tyrone. O'Neill strategically walked this tightrope as long as he could, using his remarkable patience and wily diplomacy to survive and flourish within the safety of his Ulster hills, rebelling only when driven to extremity.

Heaney, writing in English, fostered by Faber, inscribes in "Terminus" his survival skills in negotiating the world "in between"; two traditions "were easier carried than one"; he might always "have second thoughts," but, with Northern reticence he would mostly keep his second thoughts to himself. Caught like O'Neill in a web of conflicting obligations, Heaney too has been forced to parley "in earshot of his kerne."

An Open Letter, published in pamphlet form in 1983, is one such public parley. Two English writers, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, had discussed with Heaney plans to do an anthology of contemporary poetry in English for Penguin. Heaney, along with Longley, Mahon, Muldoon, and other Northern poets, agreed to be included. However, Heaney had understood that the title would be *Opened Ground,* the title of one of his poems, to celebrate the freshness and cultural diversity of the selection. When instead the anthology was published under the colonizing title, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, Heaney, after weighing everything in the balance, courageously spoke out.

The Epigraph to *An Open Letter,* taken from Gaston Bachelard, exposes the pain of the customary Northern reticence: "What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak . . . It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us." Heaney sustains in his *Letter* a tone of delicate diplomacy, declaring like O'Neill his need and his right, to resist being taken over:

> You'll understand I draw the line
> At being robbed of what is mine,
> My *patria*, my deep design
> To be at home
> In my own place and dwell within
> Its proper name
>
> . . . .
>
> Need I go on? I hate to bite
> Hands that led me to the limelight
> In the Penguin book (8-13).

In *An Open Letter,* Heaney states clearly a sense of his Irish identity: "be advised/My passport's green./No glass of ours was ever raised to toast *The Queen.*" Yet, in view of the fact that he is published in England, and

allows himself to be showered with honors by the English, Heaney, like O'Neill, must be of two minds.

Early on in *Preoccupations*, Heaney outlines the ambivalence of his relation to the English lyric tradition:

> I speak and write in English, but the English tradition is not ultimately home . . . Two Elizabethan poets enforce this realization. Edmund Spenser's view of the state of Ireland puts me at a distance from him. From his castle in Cork he watched the effects of a campaign designed to settle the Irish question. "Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not carry them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves." At that point I feel closer to the natives, the geniuses of the place. And a little after that, Sir John Davies, that silver poet of the sixteenth century, arrived in Ireland as Queen Elizabeth's Attorney-General with special responsibility for the Plantation of Ulster, playing a forward-looking colon to my backward-looking colonise (34-35).

Heaney goes on to describe how his sensibility has been formed by his sense of his home place, with its

"political and cultural traumas"; his formal education added to this a knowledge and love of both the Irish and English literary traditions. For Heaney this duality continues to prove poetically fruitful: his final lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, "Frontiers of Writing," reiterates the fact that he "draws cultural and psychic sustenance" from a multiplicity of places, but that it is mainly from the duality of his Irish tradition that he gets sustenance:

> There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland, and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances (*The Redress of Poetry* 202).

Heaney goes on to encourage members of "the majority in Northern Ireland" to make "a corresponding effort at two-mindedness, and start to conceive of themselves within—rather than beyond—the Irish element" (203).

Derek Mahon, statistically a member of the majority in Northern Ireland, has been "two-minded" in Heaney's sense ever since he was Dubliner John Boyle's pupil at

the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and learned from him the complexities of Irish history. Indeed, he even surpasses Heaney in exemplary two-mindedness, carrying both Irish and a British passports. Like his fellow Northern poets Montague and Heaney, Mahon is drawn to the figure of Hugh O'Neill, and the manner in which, at a moment of particular crisis in Ulster's history, O'Neill was confronted with the consequences of his conflicting loyalties. Mahon's focus is on the defeated O'Neill, and his clear-eyed tragic awareness of what that defeat will mean for his people.

In 1970 the Northern Irish magazine *Threshold* published Mahon's "Excerpt from a Play"; this fragment is all that survives of what was meant to be a full play. In a letter to this writer, in the form of a long note in the margins of a photocopy of the fragment, Mahon explains:

> This is all that remains of a play about Hugh O'Neill that I started late in 1969 and abandoned in early 1970(?). I researched the background pretty thoroughly in the Trinity library & filled a couple of notebooks with stuff: These have since disappeared. The idea, of course, was to represent in theatrical form the origins of "Northern Ireland": Kinsale, The Plantation, the Flight of the Earls. One of my principal sources, inevitably, was

O'Faolain's *The Great O'Neill*; also the State Papers of the period, from which the text of O'Neill's submission is taken. O'Neill submitted to Mountjoy at Mellifont Co. Meath, ratified(?) his surrender in Dublin Castle & subsequently "visited" James I at Hampton Court . . . Mountjoy, by the way, was an interesting man in his own right. Having defeated O'Neill, he later held office under James in London, but scandalized the court by his ostentatious affair with Penelope [Devereux] Rich, once mistress of Sir Philip Sidney (see *Astrophel and Stella*). When Mountjoy died, a Catholic convert, Penelope had Dowland write the famous *Lachrymae* in his memory. Her brother was the Earl of Essex, Elizabeth's one-time favourite. The "Essex circle", which included Mountjoy, Raleigh & Spenser, were the intellectual elite under Elizabeth, but disgraced themselves in one way or another. Their country seat was Penshurst Place on the Kent-Surry-Sussex border, immortalized by Ben Jonson & D. Mahon . . . The whole thing is rich in the most gorgeous and bizarre detail; incidentals distract from the narrative all along the line. This was the trouble really, I bit off more than I could chew, too much for a single play: a fat historical novel might do it all justice, with passionate period figures snarling and swooning on the cover.

What Mahon finds so fascinating about O'Neill as a subject is the web of intrigue surrounding him, his association with the leading poets and intellectuals of his time, and above all, the tragic irony of his defeat and exile. The play fragment (in rhyming couplets), focuses on how O'Neill was caught in the cross-fire of British politics. In the opening scene at Hampton Court, James, after a formal greeting, refers to his correspondence with O'Neill while Elizabeth was still alive: "Letters that passed between us years ago/ Can make no difference now you know." Mahon's marginal note explains that these lines "refer to a tentative alliance, some years previously, between James and O'Neill against Elizabeth: Mountjoy was in on the plot." James, described by Mahon as having "a Scots accent" and being a "keen Protestant," has some new plans for Ulster now that he is securely on the English throne.

James, in Mahon's play, has Sir John Harington read out the terms of O'Neill's submission, which include O'Neill's being made to pledge to assist in the destruction of Irish civilization:

> He will be conformable and assistant to the Kings magistrates, for the advancement of his service, as namely for the abolishing of all barbarous customs contrary to the laws, being the seeds of all

> incivility, and for the clearing of difficult passages and places, which are the nurseries of rebellion, wherein he will employ the labours of the people of his country, and will endeavour for himself and the people of his country to erect civil habitations, and such as shall be of greater effect to preserve against any force but the power of the state.

This submission is signed "Hughe Tirone": O'Neill has been stripped of his titles, especially that of "The O'Neill," which, the English knew, the Irish esteemed above "Caesar." James proceeds to elaborate on his plans to plant Ulster with Scots Protestants, "industrious folk of sound religion." Mahon, with the historic consequences of the Plantation, and with the effects of the zealous Protestants in mind, especially in the form of the current Troubles, has O'Neill protest, "That way you would create two nations/ Think of the future generations." James, in reply, reminds O'Neill of the finality of his defeat, and the play fragment comes to an end. In demanding that O'Neill "Employ the labours of the people of his country" in the "clearing of difficult passages and places," James and the English were insisting that the Irish cooperate in their own destruction. These clearances were no less than the cutting down of Irish woods, leaving all desolate,

stripping away the last locus of resistance to English "civilitie."

The Irish forests were, to the English, places of refuge for Irish rebels, called, in the woodcuts of John Derricke for example, "wood-kerne". Heaney, in "Exposure", his last poem in *North,* shows how the traumatic experiences of these clearances entered the Irish unconscious, to surface again in the poetry of the present Troubles. In self-exile in Wicklow, after receiving death threats from the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (descendants of some of those "industrious folk of sound religion" James I had planted in Ulster), the poet finds in the image of the wood-kerne a fitting symbol of his Ovidean metamorphosis and his troubled state of mind:

> How did I end up like this?
> I often think of my friends'
> Beautiful prismatic counselling
> And the anvil brains of some who hate me
>
> And I sit weighing and weighing
> My responsible *Tristia*
>
> . . . . . .

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows (*North* 73).

In his sonnet sequence "Clearances," published in *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney returns to this historic trauma using the image of the historic clearances to show how the actual, once lost, enters the heart and mind and becomes an imaginative resource. In these sonnets in memory of the poet's mother, who died in 1984, the tree cut down, clears "a space/Utterly empty, utterly a source"(8); describing the moment of his mother's death, Heaney fuses the experience of personal and historic loss into one powerful image:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened
(*The Haw Lantern* 31).

The destruction of language and culture was decreed together with the tearing away of the trees, in the clearances ordered in O'Neill's submission. In the poetry of Montague, Mahon, and Heaney, memory defies cruelty. The space occupied by those trees, and the culture they supported, has through the lines of their poetry, been "emptied into us to keep."

One of the major ironies of history is that the memory has been kept, for the most part in English, the language of the colonizer, but the culture survives in Irish as well. Derek Mahon, though not fluent In the Irish language, considers it an essential part of the Irish cultural heritage. In editing the *Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Mahon included poetry in Irish, not just translations. One of the most prominent Irish language poets in contemporary Ireland is the young poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who describes the Irish language, pronounced dead, as a corpse that, surprisingly, sits up and speaks. Her poem "Céist na Teangan" ("The Language Issue") suggests that poetry written in the Irish language may still have as portentous a future as the English lyrics of poets like Mahon who, along with Muldoon, is one of her chief translators into English:

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh
I mbáidín teangan
faoi mar a leagfá naíonán
I gcliabhán
a bheadh fite fuaite
de dhuilleoga feileastraim
is bitiúman agus pic
bheith cuimilte lena thóin

Ansan é a leagadh síos
I measc na ngiolcach
is coigeal na mban sí
le taobh na habhann
féachaint n'fheadaraís
cá dtabharfaidh an sruth é
féacaint, dála Mhaoise,
an bhfoirfidh iníon Fhorainn?

Translation by Paul Muldoon

I place my hope on the water
in this little boat
of the language, the way a body might put
an infant

in a basket of intertwined
iris leaves,

its underside proofed
with bitumin and pitch,

then set the whole thing down amidst
the sedge
and bulrushes by the edge
of a river

only to have it borne hither and thither,
not knowing how it might end up;
in the lap, perhaps,
of some Pharaoh's daughter.(155)

Part of the colonial and post-colonial predicament in Ireland is that the main stream of Irish literature in modern times has been in English. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Douglas Hyde made an enormous contribution by their acts of retrieval from the Irish; their final objective, however, was to enrich the English-language tradition.

English as spoken in Ireland retains traces of Elizabethan English. James Joyce remarks on this in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen is amazed that the Dean of Studies, an English Jesuit, had never heard the word "tundish" used for a funnel. Stephen feels superior momentarily, knowing that "tundish" is good Elizabethan English, still in current use in Dublin.

Then remembering that this man is "a countryman of Ben Jonson" Stephen is filled with "unrest of Spirit," and he thinks:

> His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language (189).

Samuel Beckett, also, in his radio play *All That Fall*, has his main character, Mrs. Rooney, complain that in speaking English she often feels as if she were speaking a dead language, "like our own poor dear Gaelic" (27).

Seamus Heaney, brought up in post-Plantation Ulster, is very conscious of the residues of the planters' vocabulary in everyday speech. In his poem "Traditions" he states:

> We are to be proud
> of our Elizabethan English:
> "varsity" for example,
> is grass-roots stuff with us;
>
> we "deem" or we "allow"
> when we suppose
> and some cherished archaisms
> are correct Shakespearean
> (*Wintering Out* 31).

In the early seventies, Derek Mahon, seeking to escape Ireland, its Troubles, and its "language difficulties," moved to Surrey and lived in the laundry flat of the old Ford Manor estate, where "the earth disposes/bluebells, roses and primroses" ("Ford Manor"). The poet tries to feel at home there, "flicking my ash/Into the rose bushes/As if I owned the place." Admiring the rich trees, he cannot help but remember the clearances in Ulster, "where the trees are few and far between./No richly forested slopes,/Not for a long time" ("The Return"). While living at Ford Manor, Mahon made a pilgrimage to Penshurst, place of so many associations with the Elizabethan lyric and, for Mahon, with Irish history.

In his letter to this writer about his O'Neill play, Mahon alludes to "the Essex circle," including, besides Sidney, "Mountjoy, Raleigh, and Spenser." Mahon calls them the "intellectual elite" of their time, but goes on to say that they "disgraced themselves in one way or another." By this he may mean that they disgraced themselves in Elizabeth's eyes, or he may mean some kind of "*trahison des clercs*," because of their track record in Ireland. The persistence of references to the Elizabethan conquest of Ulster in "Penshurst Place," written after a visit to the Sidney country seat, shows how, for Mahon, there is no escape from the matter of

Irish history; his ironic awareness of English policy in Ireland permeates the lyric.

Ben Jonson, in the first part of his celebrated poem "To Penshurst," having praised in luscious detail the topography around the house, concludes the section with images of abundance:

> Then hath thy orchard fruit, thy garden flowers,
> Fresh as the air and new as are the hours
> The early cherry, with the later plum,
> Fig, grape, and quince, each in his time doth come
> The flushing apricot and wooly peach
> Hang on thy walls that every child may reach.
> And though thy walls be of the country stone,
> They are reared with no man's ruin, no man's groan
> (Lines 39-46).

Derek Mahon, looking upon those walls, sees many a man's ruin, many a man's groan. The whole "Westward Enterprise" of conquest and colonization supported walls like those. As the historian Nicholas Canny points out, Sir Henry Sidney's stint as Lord Deputy in Ireland was for gain as well as glory (*The Westward Enterprise* 49); Mahon's awareness of all this adds to the pointed irony of his poem:

Penshurst Place

The bright drop quivering on a thorn
in the rich silence after rain,
lute music in the orchard aisles,
the paths ablaze with daffodils,
intrigue and venery in the air
à l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs,
the iron hand in the velvet glove—
come live with me and be my love.

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
(*Selected Poems* 75).

Mahon's poem alternates exquisite lines that evoke the atmosphere of Elizabethan poetry, with lines that undermine the power of these to enchant: "lute music in the orchard aisles," is countered with "intrigue and venery in the air." The Proustian reference evokes images of young women like Penelope Devereux, who formed part of

the circle around Sidney at Penshurst; the image of the moon in the second stanza, "A pearl face, numinously bright,/shining in silence of the night," resembles such Elizabethan references to the moon as Sidney's in sonnet XXXI of *Astrophel and Stella*:

> With how sad steps, O moon, Thou climbest the skies!
> How silently, and with how wan a face!

Mahon's "iron hand in the velvet glove" refers, of course, to Elizabethan self-fashioning, harsh cruel actions costumed in the velvet glove of the rhetoric of "civilitie." In the sonnet preceding Sidney's address to the moon, there is a reference to the more down-to-earth matter of Sir Henry Sidney's "civilizing" efforts in Ulster:

> What now the Dutch in their full diets boast:
> How Holland hearts now so good towns be lost,
> Trust in the shade of pleasant Orange-tree:
> How Ulster likes of that same golden bit
> Wherewith my father once made it half tame. (XXX)

The refrain "come live with me and be my love," from Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" adds to the irony of the poem. The lure of the English pastoral is lessened for a reader aware of the

iron hand hidden in the velvet glove. Mahon's response to the lure "Come live with me, and be my love" was to move to Surrey. However, the condition implied in "and if these pleasures may thee move" is subverted in "Penshurst Place" by memories of Mountjoy's siege of "the Spanish ships around Kinsale" and "bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs" haunting the Irish consciousness.

Mahon's fellow poet and fellow lover of the Elizabethan lyric, Seamus Heaney, discussing "Place and Displacement in Mahon's Poetry," sees "Penshurst Place" as exemplary of the poet's duality of response to the English tradition. Referring to Mahon's relishing of "the blandishments of Renaissance poetry, music and manners," he goes on to point out how Mahon's yearning after "these Arcadian harmonies" is haunted by the disharmonies of history:

> Sir Philip Sidney is one dream, all gilded valour and English patriotic aura, but another dream associated with Penshurst Place is Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, leader in the last Irish war against Elizabeth's armies . . . so that the courtliness which is evoked by the verse and symbolized by Penshurst Place is only part of the poem's life. Its underlife, its shadow elsewhere, is the Ulster of hill-forts, cattle raids, and rain-sodden gallowglasses, where Hugh O'Neill was born and to

> which, after eight years of being fostered at Penshurst place in the care of Sir Henry Sidney, he returned. "Penshurst Place", then, focuses Mahon's sense of bilocation, culturally in love with the Surrey countryside where he was living with his family when this poem was written, but ethnically and politically with the country of his first nurture (13).

Life amidst the rich woods of Surrey soon left Mahon lonely for the bleak landscape of the Antrim coast; he is ready to be released from "that pale paradise":

> how could we
> survive indefinitely
> so far from the city and the sea?
>
> Finding at last,
> too creamy for our taste
> the fat profusion of that feast,
>
> we carried on
> to chaos and confusion,
> our birthright and our proper portion
> ("The Woods" 155).

Mahon's "Going Home" affirms his affinity for that

part of his birthright symbolized by the gaunt thorn tree:

> Rooted in stony ground,
> A last stubborn growth
> Battered by constant rain
> And twisted by the sea-wind
>
> With nothing to recommend it
> But its harsh tenacity
> . . . . . .
> Crone, crow, scarecrow,
> Its worn figures scrabbling
> At a torn sky, it stands
> On the edge of everything
> Like a burnt-out angel
> Raising petitionary hands
> (*Selected Poems* 67).

Mahon associates "the last stubborn growth" with the "crone," that is, the *cailleach*, a symbol of Ireland, laid waste by the ravages of history, but still standing, "on the edge of everything." Mahon's admiration and "desperate love" are reserved for such "harsh tenacity." His best poetry is about states of extremity; "Derry Morning" exposes the "harsh tenacity" of that city's survival of its latest siege:

The mist clears and the cavities
Glow black in the rubbled city's
Broken mouth. An early crone,
Muse of a fitful revolution
Wasted by the fray, she sees
Her *aisling* falter in the breeze,
Her oak-grove vision hesitate
By empty wharf and city gate.

Here it began, and here at last
It fades into the finite past
Or seems to:
Clattering shadows whop
Mechanically over pub and shop.
A strangely pastoral silence rules
The shining roofs and murmuring schools;
For this is how the centuries work--
Two steps forward, one step back
(*Selected Poems* 123).

The last two lines quoted from "Derry Morning" sound a note of hope about the movement of history. Discussing contemporary poetry in his introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, Thomas Kinsella singles out for praise this poem of Derek Mahon. Speaking of how Mahon's poetry "registers a dual responsibility, toward the

medium and toward the past," he goes on to speak of the two aspects of existence in the contemporary North, "the one adjusting normally in the psyche, the other kept irritated at the political surface." Kinsella finds images from the depths of the psyche "significantly present" in poems like "Derry Morning," where "the early crone and her vision have clear remote echoes" (XXX). From a fellow poet like Kinsella, translator of early Irish literature and patriarchal guardian of the Irish tradition, such praise is a poetic canonization.

Mahon's poem "Rathlin" seems to move away from the scene of the trouble in "Derry Morning," out past the edge to the numinous mists off the North Antrim coast. The poem remembers a visit to Rathlin Island in search of its bird sanctuary, but the poet finds history haunting him even in that primal place.

The earlier poem "An Old Lady," celebrating the life of his mother-in-law, wonders about what she sees when she stares out to sea from Bushmills:

> Out there beyond the edge
> Of the golf-course tosses
> The ghost of the *Girona,*
> Flagship of the Armada—
> History. Does the knowledge
> Alter the world she sees?
> (*Selected Poems* 126)

History certainly alters the world of Mahon's poetry, even his appreciation of the English language. In *England Their England*, Denis Donoghue explores how the knowledge of history inevitably alters the Irish and Scottish perception of English, because of their being "clear instances of the bearing of language upon power, and power upon language." Speaking of the destruction of Scots Gaelic after Culloden in 1746, Donoghue remarks upon Samuel Johnson's dismissive attitude toward its demise when he visited the Western Isles in 1773. Johnson had remarked on the programmatic erasure of the language, where the people were refused even a Gaelic version of the Holy Scriptures in the schools "that they might have no monument in their mother-tongue," and had referred to "Erse" as "the rude speech of a barbarous people." Denis Donoghue concludes:

> It is evident that "the triumph of the English language" was achieved by the same forces which also expressed themselves in worldly versions of translation and assimilation: the voyaging of Raleigh and Drake, imperial settlements, trade conquest, the grammar of exercised power. Language has never been neutral; its spirituality as breath and voice has always issued from bodies and the space they occupy, and therefore from the political conflicts in which they engage (5-7).

The "voyages of Raleigh and Drake" are especially relevant in a discussion of Mahon's poem "Rathlin," since the poem opens with a reference to their merciless massacre of the followers of Somhairle Buidh MacDonnell on Rathlin Island in 1575. The MacDonnells were the leading Scots family in the Antrim Glens, with Dunluce Castle as their stronghold, and Rathlin as a link with Kintyre. Whenever the Scots in Ireland were in danger, or their Irish allies needed help against the English, signal fires were set on the high points on the coastal hills of Antrim, and the fighting men of Kintyre would arm themselves and cross in their galleys.

In the case of the attack on Rathlin, help arrived too late. Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh, under the command of the elder Essex, (father of the Earl who parleyed with O'Neill), attacked without warning. Elizabeth wanted the alliance between the O'Neills, MacDonnells, and O'Donnells to be destroyed, in case such an alliance, with Spanish help, would topple her from her throne. By Essex's command, every last person on Rathlin was slaughtered. In *A History of Ulster*, Jonathan Bardon gives an account of the effect of the slaughter on Somhairle Buidh, who was standing, powerless to help, on the mainland:

> Essex relayed to the Queen information received from his spy, that Sorley had "stood upon the mainland of

> the Glynnes, and saw the taking of the island, and was like to run mad for sorrow (as the spy saith), turning and tormenting himself, and saying that he had then lost all that he ever had"(84).

Bardon goes on to tell how Elizabeth answered Essex with thanks, adding, in her own hand: "If lines could value life; or thanks could answer praise, I should esteem my pen's labour the best employed time that many years had lent me" (84).

The labor of Mahon's pen inscribes both the slaughter and the island's survival through the vicissitudes of time:

Rathlin

> A long time since the last scream cut short--
> Then an unnatural silence; and then
> A natural silence, slowly broken
> By the shearwater, by the sporadic
> Conversation of crickets, the bleak
> Reminder of a metaphysical wind.
> Ages of this, till the report
> Of an outboard motor at the pier
> Shatters the dream-time, and we land
> As if we were the first visitors here

The whole island a sanctuary where amazed
Oneiric species whistle and chatter,
Evacuating rock-face and cliff-top.
Cerulean distance, an ocean haze--
Nothing but sea-smoke to the ice-cap
And the old somnolent freighter.
Bombs doze in the housing estates
But here they are through with history--
Custodians of a lone light which repeats
One simple statement to the turbulent sea.

A long time since the unspeakable violence-
Since Somhairle Buidh, powerless on the mainland,
Heard the screams of the Rathlin women
Borne to him, seconds later, upon the wind.
Only the cry of the shearwater
And the roar of the outboard motor
Disturb the singular peace. Spray-blind,
We leave here the infancy of the race,
Unsure among the pitching surfaces
Whether the future lies before us or behind.
(*Selected Poems* 122)

Rathlin, once a rich stone-age source of porcellanite for axe-heads, is noted by geographers like Estyn Evans for its archeological traces of passage graves, dating from 2500 B.C. Mahon's perspective on human time, which

resembles the spiritual view *sub specie aeternatatis,* reminds us that Rathlin and its Oneiric species were there long before "the infancy of the race," and will outlast man's dwelling. As he leaves the island, he is "Unsure among the pitching surfaces/ Whether the future lies before us or behind." The poet imagines Rathlin as a source of light on the meaning of history. The people of Rathlin, on account of their long memories and their lighthouse, are "Custodians of a lone light which repeats/ One simple statement to the turbulent sea."

Lighthouses are key symbols in Mahon's poetry, signals of hope and direction. In "A Lighthouse in Maine," the light given "is not/ The light of heaven/ But that of this world" (*Selected Poems* 142); in *Light Music,* "Aesthetics" celebrates

> Neither the tearful taper
> nor the withered wick,
> that sickly crowd.
> But the single bright
> landing light
> ghosting an iodine cloud
> (*Selected Poems* 65).

Even though Mahon points out that this is not "the light of heaven," it certainly bears secular traces of the light longed for in hymns like "Abide With Me," referred

to in "Nostalgias": "Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies"; Mahon's light is a secular version elucidating this world, with the light of his imagination rather than of the skies.

The preoccupation of Mahon's poetry is with the casualties of history, the lost and the helpless; the vision of "Abide With Me" still persists somewhere in his consciousness: "Change and decay in all around I see," but instead of seeing these sites of decay as causes for despair, Mahon sees them as sources of inspiration, "places where a thought might grow" (*Selected Poems* 62). This line comes from Mahon's most anthologized poem, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," inspired by the novel *Troubles,* which was written by a close friend, the Liverpool-Irish novelist J. G. Farrell. *Troubles,* published in 1970, formed together with *The Siege of Krishnapoor* and *The Singapore Grip,* a trilogy exploring the decay and collapse of the British Empire. In an essay on J. G. Farrell, Mahon describes the Majestic Hotel in Co. Wexford, where *Troubles* is set in 1919-1921, the time of Ireland's war of independence, "when the remnants of British rule submerge in a rising tide of agitation and violence. The book is about many things--about politics, love, action, suffering--but above all it is about decline" (*Selected Prose* 234-235). It was this atmosphere of decline which attracted Mahon's poetic imagination to

Troubles; the obsession with change and decay permeates the book from the very first sentences:

> In those days the Majestic was still standing in Kilnalough at the very end of a slim peninsula covered with dead pines leaning here and there at odd angles. At that time there were probably yachts there too during the summer since the hotel held a regatta every July. But now both pines and yachts have floated away and one day the high tide may very well meet over the narrowest part of the peninsula, made narrower by erosion. And a few years later still the Majestic itself followed the boats and preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground--but by that time of course, the place was in such a state of disrepair that it hardly mattered (9-10).

The Majestic is the property of Edward Spencer, described by Mahon, in his essay on *Troubles*, as "An irascible Anglo-Irish blimp of strongly "loyalist" views" (234). Echoes of Edmund Spenser in the owner's name make of *Troubles* J.G. Farrell's "view of the present state of Ireland" during the war of independence, at the cusp of colonial collapse.

Mahon extracts from Farrell's *Troubles* an image of the lost and forgotten left behind by Irish independence;

the Majestic, once a Grand Hotel, has fallen, like the British Empire itself, into decline. The wave of change that destroyed the pines has brought about a new Ireland, leaving behind helpless souls like the genteel old Protestant ladies who have been inhabiting the hotel.

"A Disused shed in Co. Wexford" universalizes this sense of loss; its epigraph, "Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels," from George Seferis's *Mythistorema*, recalls a larger sense of loss and suffering. Like Seferis, Mahon is attempting through metaphor to evoke felt history, the poem becoming the cry of voiceless suffering:

A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford

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 wild-flowers in the lift-shaft,
Indian compounds where the wind dances
And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
Lime crevices behind rippling rain-barrels,
Dog corners for bone burials;
And 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.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star ——
What should they do there but desire?
So many days beyond the rhododendrons
With the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud,
They have learnt patience and silence
Listening to the rooks querulous in the high wood.

They have been waiting for us in a foetor
Of vegetable sweat since civil war days,
Since the gravel-crunching, interminable departure
Of the expropriated mycologist.
He never came back, and light since then
Is a keyhole rusting gently after rain.
Spiders have spun, flies dusted to mildew
And once a day, perhaps, they have heard something--
A trickle of masonry, a shout from the blue
Or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane

. . . .

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 drought
And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
At the flash-bulb firing-squad we wake them with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for worms,
They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith.

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.
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 naive labours have been in vain!"
(*Selected Poems* 62)

The petitionary cries of the crumbling mushrooms bring to a restrained crescendo a basic motif of Mahon's poetry. Seamus Deane, in *Celtic Revivals,* states "Lost lives are Mahon's obsession; his poetry is an attempt to fulfill them." (162) Deane, speaking of "The Disused Shed," admires "the lovely matter-of-factness of detail" (162) which allows the grief to come to life for the reader with a gradual intensity. The extremity of the

mushrooms, and their abandoned state is due to a change of regime: "the expropriated mycologist" has left them shut away, listening to the trickling masonry of collapsing historic structures. Deane interprets their cry for release, as a petition to rejoin the mainstream of history:

> Their grotesque struggle has been silently waged since the days of the civil war. The mushrooms sing the lament, the plea for release. But their release is into, not from, history. They seek to escape from the brutality of a dark, instinctive and lethal struggle into the light of recognition. Mahon has here inverted his usual procedure. The lost lives are not lived beyond history, but before it. Their fulfillment is in history, in one sense, he is saying after life there is art. But he is also saying that the only life that can produce art is one which is engaged with history (*Celtic Revivals* 162).

Mahon's poetic of extremity is articulated in muted but passionate tones, revealing a humane compassion for the losers of history. The posture of the mushrooms crowding to the keyhole resembles that of "the last stubborn growth/ on the edge of every thing/ Like a burnt-out angel/Raising petitionary hands" ("Going

Home"). To Friedrich Holderlin's question "what is the use of poets in a mean-spirited time?" Mahon's reply would seem to be: "To inscribe in their poems memorials to the weak souls among the asphodels, and poetically ventriloquise their cries." And yet, as well as being one of the "places where a thought might grow," "The Disused Shed" seems to be the locus of second thoughts: exposure to "the flash-bulb firing-squad," elicits "the ghost of a scream"; these creatures waiting for deliverance "in gravity and good faith" can be injured and exploited by the intrusion of the media. The poet's use of "we" suggests the poet's possible collusion, as does the reference to "light meter."

In his book *The Witness of Poetry*, Czeslaw Milosz speaks of Poland during the period 1939-1945, when the poets watched Europe sinking into inhumanity, and discusses the difficulty of articulating the unspeakable while using the tools of the already disgraced culture:

> The main reproach made to culture was that it maintained a network of meanings and symbols as a facade to hide the genocide underway. By the same token, religion, philosophy and art became suspect as accomplices in deceiving man with lofty ideas, in order to veil the truth of existence . . . Some detachment, some coldness, is necessary to elaborate a form. People thrown into the middle of events that

> tear cries of pain from their mouths have difficulty in finding the distance necessary to transform this material artistically . . . The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet's consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization and culture. What surrounds us here and now is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist--and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins (80).

The background reality that Mahon's poetic consciousness brought to the writing of this poem about the remnant found in the burnt-out Majestic, includes the unspeakable tragedy of Treblinka, the persistent conviction of poets like Osip Mandelstam that people still need poetry, and Yeats's powerful "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," set in the time of the burning of The Majestic, Yeats laments the destruction of a civilization enacted in the burning of such places: "Many ingenious lovely things are gone," and goes on to point to the vulnerable fragility of "masterwork of intellect or hand." Yet the artist persists in creating, even in the face of atrocity:

> But is there any comfort to be found?
> Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
> What more is there to say? that country round
> None dared admit, if such a thought were his,
> Incendiary or bigot could be found
> To burn that stump on the Acropolis
> Or break in bits the famous ivories
> Or traffic in the grasshoppers or bees
> (*Collected Poems* 206-209).

In the face of the burden of history weighing on his conscience, Mahon, like Beckett, still feels that the poet must write out of the penury of his condition, as illustrated by "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford." Steering clear of crippling cynicism an expected response, he affirms "what vanishes" and refuses to "traffic in mockery." Seamus Heaney sees this poem of Mahon's as emerging from the long visionary perspective of a poet who has detached himself from the scene of trouble, all the better to encompass its pain in his poetry:

> 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. The amplitude of its effects, its vault-filling resonance depend upon its displaced perspective. Those rooted helplessly in place plead with the capable uprooted visitor, be he poet or photographer, and it is in this pleading that we find the psychological as opposed to the political, nub of the poem. 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 (*Place and Displacement* 9).

In writing "The Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," Mahon was exploring a place "where a thought might grow"; it grew in that part of his mind which remains engaged with the matter of history. The thought grows within the confines of the English lyric, a form Yeats had already appropriated so powerfully for the expression of the Irish experience. In this poem, Mahon's state of mind is one of Yeatsian responsibility; the poem fulfills the

obligation acknowledged in the last stanza of "The Spring Vacation":

> One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
> The things that happen in the kitchen houses
> And echoing back streets of this desperate city
> Should engage more than my casual interest,
> Exact more interest than my casual pity
> (*Poems* 1962-1978 4)

The conclusion to be drawn from a reading of Mahon's poetry in the light of its historical context is that the poetry displays subtle intricacies of resistance and engagement. Mahon maintains a fidelity to the independence and integrity of the lyric poem, while at the same time facing the music of what happens, taking the risk of confronting the disruptive forces of history, and inviting, as it were, the Maenads into the elegant precision of his verse structures.

In a culture where art and violence have been so closely linked together, Mahon's poetry exhibits an exemplary restraint, but not a refusal. By temperament attracted to the "cold dream/of a place out of time" ("The Last of the Fire Kings"), he nevertheless chooses the vicissitudes of his time as a fit subject for poetry. Mahon persists in the hope against hope that his words will themselves form into a beacon of light. In "The Sea

In Winter" Mahon describes the poetic metamorphoses he yearns to bring about in his moment of time:

> One day,
> Perhaps, the words will find their mark
> And leave a brief glow in the dark,
> Effect mutations of dead things
> Into a form that nearly sings.
> (*Poems* 1962-1978: 113)

In this study of Derek Mahon's poetry, an attempt has been made to show how the poet's struggle towards an adequate expression of his poetic vision coincides with the struggle of his home place to find its identity. Mahon's poetry is exemplary in the sense described by Heaney in *The Redress of Poetry*:

> In emergent cultures the struggle of an individual consciousness towers affirmation and distinctness, may be analogous, if not coterminous, with a collective straining toward self-definition; there is a mutual susceptibility between the formation of a new tradition and the self-fashioning of individual talent.(6)

Heaney's "straining" image echoes the straining of the mushrooms in Mahon's "A Disused Shed in County Wexford", and suggests the close relation Mahon's poetics bears to the plight of his people; in developing his own poetic talent Mahon has contributed to the cultural project underway in Northern Ireland. Ireland, as long as there are poets like Mahon, will continue to be, in Yeats's words "an Ireland the poets have imagined."

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