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Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions

Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
The very language in which the poem
Was written, and the idea of language,
All these things will pass away in time.

Derek Mahon, "Heraclitus on Rivers"

Poems 1962-1978 (1979) was in effect a volume of "new and selected poems". It drew on three books: *Night-Crossing* (1968), *Lives* (1972) and *The Snow Party* (1975), and added some nineteen pieces not previously published in book form. Eleven years later came *Selected Poems*, a larger volume than the 1979 one, containing 102 poems as against 88. Only one item, "Dawn at St Patrick's", had not been published in book form before. The *Selected Poems* had a greater body of work to select from, for the nineteen eighties had seen publication of *The Hunt by Night* (1982) and two "interim" collections: *Courtyards in Delft* (1980) which was subsumed into *The Hunt by Night*, and *Antarctica* (1985). Practically all of the new items in *Poems 1962-1978* are preserved in the *Selected Poems*, as are all of the poems from the subsequent books, with the exception of one of the pair entitled "Brecht in Svendborg" in *The Hunt by Night*. There was a considerable pruning of the selections from the books that had preceded *Poems 1962-1978*: the representation of *Night-Crossing* shrank from twenty-four to thirteen, out of a possible twenty-eight; of *Lives* from twenty-one to seventeen, out of twenty-six; and of *The Snow Party* from nineteen to eleven, out of twenty-four.¹

The organisation of the books, especially of the earlier ones, seems to have had some architectonic significance: for instance, *Night-Crossing* achieves closure with "The Poets Lie Where They Fell" and "Legacies" — the latter a version of Villon's testament in ballad form; and the opening poem in *The Snow Party*, the collection following

1. *Night-Crossing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) (N-C); *Lives* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) (L); *The Snow Party* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) (TSP); *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) (P); *Courtyards in Delft* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1981) (CID); *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) (THN); *Antarctica* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1985) (A); *Selected Poems* (London: Loughcrew; Oxford: Viking, Gallery, Oxford University Press, 1991) (SP). Subsequent references are to these editions, as abbreviated. The numbers given for the representation of poems from the various collections are not to be taken as hard-and-fast for, as will be seen, the identity of some poems is not absolute.

Lives, is called "Afterlives". Neither *Poems 1962-1978* nor *Selected Poems* preserves the names of the various collections on which they draw. The phrase "night-crossing", used as the title of the first collection, was taken from the last line of "The Prisoner" (N-C, p. 32); this poem is called "Jail Journal" in P, and is omitted from SP. The eponymous poems of *Lives* and *The Snow Party* survive in P and SP, but the organisation of the books does not. Along with the omission of poems, and the rewriting of some of those that are retained, the integrity of the groupings represented by the collections is eroded; poems originally from *Lives* are likely to be found in among pieces from *Night-Crossing* and so on.

The texts that have appeared between book covers display a complex textual history. It is evident from the publishing history that practically all his poems so far have been considered for publication in book form on two or three occasions. Apart from the appearance of individual poems in periodicals and magazines, there have been pamphlets, collections, interim collections, and two selections. This has afforded opportunities for omission, rearrangement, retitling, rewriting, expansion or abridgement of poems.

For instance, "J.P. Donleavy's Dublin" (L) is included in *Poems 1962-1978* as "Dog Days" and in *Selected Poems* as "Dream Days". "Day Trip to Donegal" (N-C) appears in P with a stanza dropped and four verbal changes; this is substantively the version in SP, but with two further verbal adjustments. The omission of the stanza is significant in the context of Mahon's work generally, as shall be seen below. Some of the changes made to poems are simply explained. In the *Selected Poems* the language tends to be modified in the direction of gentility, so that "To scare you shitless" in "Table Talk" (THN, p. 27) becomes "To scare your pants off" (SP, p. 139); the line "Dog corners for shit burials" in "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" (TSP, p. 36) is changed to "Dog corners for bone burials" (P, p. 79, SP, p. 62); and the expostulatory "What middle-class curts we are" ("Afterlives", TSP, p. 1, P, p. 57) dwindles to "What middle-class twits we are" (SP, p. 50).² Errors are corrected, so that the phrase "bland with rage" in "Rock Music" (THN, p. 25) becomes "blind with rage" (SP, p. 100). Elsewhere, what seems to be a new error slips in. The reference to "a northern land of rain and murk" ("Death and the Sun", A, p. 36) reads "... rain and muck" in SP (p. 192); the change loses an end-rhyme with "dark" in this otherwise rhymed poem.

Night-Crossing had a poem called "Gipsies"; the next collection, *Lives*, contained "Gipsies Revisited". The earlier (and to my mind

2. In an interview in *The Irish Literary Supplement*, 10, 2 (Fall 1991) Mahon comments that the original line was unacceptable and that the change was prompted by "good manners" (p. 28).

superior) poem is not reprinted, but the later one is found in both *Poems 1962-1978* and *Selected Poems*; its title, however, is altered to "Gipsies", as the intertextual hint that the subject is being revisited is no longer appropriate. In effect, the earlier poem is not simply omitted but practically unwritten, with its title being transferred to the later poem. That's not quite all: Mahon's third collection, *The Snow Party*, includes a third poem on the subject, "The Gipsies".³ *Poems 1962-1978* reprints it, but this time as the third in a group of pieces identified as "Three Poems after Jaccottet". "Three Poems by Philippe Jaccottet" appear in turn in *Selected Poems*, but the third poem is no longer "The Gipsies" but an altogether different piece, "Words in the Air". The rootless and nomadic course of these poems is representative.

There are two prose-poems in *The Snow Party*, "A Hermit" and "The Apotheosis of Tins". Neither of them survives in subsequent selections, although both are included practically word for word in *P* (two phrases added to "The Apotheosis of Tins", the title and one word change in "A Hermit"). On their second time out, they are presented not as prose-poems, but in irregular stanzas. The added lineation alters them radically. Line endings privilege phrases such as "terminal democracy" and "the notion of permanence", and the isolation of a sentence such as "We resist your patronage, your reflective leisure" gives it a gnomic significance; in the prose-poems these were part of a continuous discursive flow.

Then there is the case of "Going Home". A poem of this title is included in *The Snow Party*, and reprinted in *Poems 1962-1978*. Also in *Poems 1962-1978* is a poem called "The Return". In *Selected Poems*, we find the title "Going Home", but the poem over which it stands is, word for word, "The Return", changed only by the addition of an epigraph from *Wuthering Heights*. Is this latest version "Going Home" rewritten, or is it "The Return" retitled? In the Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, which Mahon edited with Peter Fallon, there is the observation that "the word most frequently dwelt on in [the poems anthologised] ... is probably 'home', as if an uncertainty exists as to where that actually is."⁴ In Mahon's own case, that uncertainty extends as to where the very poem written about home is.

Mention of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* brings to mind one further example of textual indeterminacy. "Courtyards in Delft" exists in two versions. In the 1981 interim collection of which it is the title poem, it has four stanzas; by the following year, placed as

3. *TSP*, p. 24. Only through a scrutiny of the book's preliminary page of "Acknowledgements" does one learn that it is a version of Jaccottet's "Les Gitans".
4. *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, edd. Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), p. xxii.

the first poem of *The Hunt by Night*, it has five. The 1990 Selected Poems reverts to four stanzas (with a slight change to the wording of the last two lines). But lest we take this as the definitive version, it should be noted that *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, also published in 1990 and jointly edited by Mahon and Peter Fallon (the publisher of Courtyards in *Delft* and the Selected Poems), includes "Courtyards in Delft" — but gives the five-stanza version from *The Hunt by Night*.

The cumulative effect of the evidence is that Mahon's poetry resists fixity. It is in a state of process, without any finished absolute being on offer. This, of course, is a theme of his work. In "Lives", the multiple possibilities of existence are sampled in a list; the plurality of the title defies any "insolent ontology".

Mahon returns to make changes in his work with a frequency that might be regarded as cavalier or scrupulous, depending on the point of view. He will not leave it alone. If nothing else, the revisions assert his continuing right as the author of the poems. How are we to regard these rewritings? They are not simply an irritation for editors who will have to establish texts for the poems. Clearly, as yet there is no final authorial intention on which to base a choice. The texts of Mahon's poems change from book to book — and I am considering here only the texts printed in collections and 'selected' editions; this is to leave out the periodical and magazine publication, let alone any consideration of typescripts, notes and drafts, proofs and revises, all of which would introduce further variant states of the texts. Mahon has not yet become his admirers — or his critics and editors, who look for a fixed and steady state in the text.

They — we — cannot plead lack of warning. There is an early poem by Mahon called "The Forger", which begins:

When I sold my fake Vermeers to Goering
 Nobody knew, nobody guessed
 The agony, the fanaticism
 Of working beyond criticism
 And better than the best. (N-C, p. 20; *SP*, p. 19)

The unnamed imagined speaker is the painter Hans van Meegeren, who, like Mahon, had a particular fondness for the Delft school. Van Meegeren's ploy was to call into being works of art that took on a parallel existence to those comfortably assumed to be genuine, and by that calling into being he called into question notions of originality. We can understand Mahon's being attracted to Van Meegeren, for Mahon too is something of a forger. Most notably, he has forged a Paul Durcan poem, "Poet Arrested for Distributing Daffodils in Castlebar".⁵ This does not **appear** in his **books**, **but there are forgeries**

5. "Orpheus Ascending: The poetry of Paul Durcan", *The Irish Review*, 1 (1986), p. 15.

— or “poems in the manner of” — such as “A Kensington Notebook” (SP, p. 90), “The Joycentenary Ode” (SP, p. 145) or “Epitaph for Flann O’Brien” (TSP, p. 28), in each of which Mahon's own voice is disguised by a parodic swerve towards the idioms of Pound, Joyce and O’Brien respectively. Mahon's forgery or imitation is complimentary in intent, an act of homage: as he has stated, “it's the mediocre who are inimitable”.⁶

This habit of parody and pastiche is of a kind with Mahon's active involvement with adaptation and translation. Such enterprises are based on the premise that a work can exist in an alternative form, different from yet recognisably sharing an identity with the original. They result in a poem whose existence is, in a particular sense, *intertextual*. The operations performed on Rimbaud's “Le Bateau Ivre” — shortened, translated into another language and into other metaphors — or on de Nerval show transmutations of language. The editorial notion of an “author's final intention”, as enunciated by Greg and Bowers, is gently challenged, conceptually if not bibliographically, by a translation which carries the work over into another state. The original works — the poems by Rimbaud or de Nerval, the play by Molière, the novel by Elizabeth Bowen — become pre-texts for Mahon's.

Two poems given some prominence in Mahon's work are the extended verse-letters “Beyond Howth Head” and “The Sea in Winter”. The former was first published separately as a pamphlet and then included in *Lives*, where it stood as the longest and final poem of that book. “The Sea in Winter” occupied a similar position on its first appearance between hard covers, in *Poems 1962-1978*, of which it is the longest poem — apart from “Beyond Howth Head”. Both poems share a verse form: rhymed eight-line stanzas of octosyllabics and, as they stand in P, are of equal length with 176 lines each. Both are later included in *Selected Poems*, but with further revisions and, in the case of “The Sea in Winter”, shortened by four stanzas.

There are at least three versions of “Beyond Howth Head”, and two of “The Sea in Winter”. Comparison of the L and P texts of “Beyond Howth Head” shows minor changes: the explanatory notes which were a feature of L have disappeared? but the allusiveness which seemed to make them necessary remains: Yeats, Shakespeare, Pope, Spenser, Beckett, Dylan Thomas, Milton, Raleigh, Chateaubriand, Thoreau, Dr Johnson, Joyce and Norman Mailer are among the authors invoked, either explicitly or by the borrowing of a phrase. Some of the invocations are more occluded than others: Spenser's

6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

7. The notes were also a feature of the earlier pamphlet publication, *Beyond Howth Head* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970).

"leude libertie" is in raised commas and glossed in the notes, but we are left to conjecture the reference to Chateaubriand in "*outré-tombe*". Whatever the particular significance of each allusion, the presence of such a range of exemplars provides a personal literary analogy to the poem's general theme — the sweep of larger currents, imaged by the wind and tide, through the fractured perception of the immediate.

A number of the changes made in the text bear on place names: the third stanza in L and SP begins "and shakes the radio-sets that play/ from the Twelve Pins to Dublin Bay"; this becomes "from Carraroe to Dublin Bay" in SP. A line in L, "from Cheltenham or Inishmaan" becomes "from Seaford or from Cushendun" in P and SP. One particularly resonant name gets elided from the last stanza. The earlier version runs:

and here I close my *Dover* Beach
scenario, for look! the watch-
ful Baily winks beyond Howth Head,
My *cailín bán* lies snug in bed
and the moon rattles the lost stones
among the rocks and the strict bones
of the drowned as I put out the light
on Mailer's *Armies of the Night*. (L, p. 38)

In P and SP this becomes

And here I close; for look, across
dark waves where bell-buoys dimly toss,
the Bailey winks beyond Howth Head
and sleep calls from the silent bed;
while the moon drags her kindred stones
among the rocks and the strict bones
of the drowned, and I put out the light
on shadows of the encroaching night. (SP, p. 49)

The removal of "*Dover Beach*" facilitates an easier rhyme to complete the couplet; split rhyme-words at line endings are not infrequent in Mahon's poems, but they tend to be removed in his later versions. The reference to *Dover Beach* is more textual than geographical. The allusion is to Matthew Arnold's poem, and the original last stanza reproduces a repertory of images from "*Dover Beach*": the moon, the momentary light, the implied presence of a companionable woman, the sweep of the sea on the shoreline — and of course Mailer's book title is coined from Arnold's last line, "Where ignorant armies clash by night". The scenario of "*Beyond Howth Head*" is, like "*Dover Beach*", based on a littoral meditation. Arnold's poem, with its sense of lost gods and a search for constants, might serve as a pretext in this and much of Mahon's other work.

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"The Sea in Winter" is another littoral meditation, this time set on the northern coast. In this poem there is less sense of a "beyond", merely an imagined sense of the Mediterranean where the addressee, Desmond O'Grady, is located:

You too have known the curious sense
Of working on the circumference — (P, p. 111)

In the revision between P and SP, four stanzas are discarded from different parts of the poem: the fifth, tenth, eighteenth and twentieth. Two new stanzas are inserted, one of them in place of the dropped eighteenth stanza; it stands seventeenth in the revised version, with the other new stanza ("Or Theseus in the open air ...") tenth. Three of the four stanzaic omissions affect the reading of the poem as a whole. The third last stanza of the earlier P text mentions Botticelli's "neglected drawings" for The *Divine* Comedy,

Diagrams of that paradise
Each has his vision of. I trace
The future in a colour-scheme,
Colours we scarcely dare to dream. (P, p. 114)

Two stanzas before that, another omitted passage had also dwelt on the future and its possibilities:

And will the year two thousand find
Me still at a window, pen in hand,
Watching long breakers curl on sand
Erosion makes for ever finer?
I hope so, for the sake of these
Subsidized serendipities.
'Ghostlier demarcations, keener
Sounds' are needed more than ever. (P, p. 113)

An earlier omission similarly removes a temporal marker, this time one pointing to the past:

When I returned one year ago
I felt like Tonio Kröger — slow
To come to terms with my own past... (P, p. 111)

This removal of perspectives on the past and future, on any temporal "beyond", is reinforced by the second of the two new stanzas added to the poem in the SP printing. This insists on the here and now of the poem's moment and renounces the glance away from the present:

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. (SP, p. 117)

As a result of the changes, this later version of "The Sea in Winter" is more insistent on peripherality. The consolations of history are removed, extending even to the disappearance of the dating "Port-stewart-Portrush, Oct 1977-Sept 1978" appended to the earlier printing. Now the poem exists undated; the conjectural glance ahead to another date, "the year two thousand", is taken away in the revision, as is the faint anticipation of "that paradise/ Each has his vision of" (P, p p 113-4).

The loss of location and dating means that the poet on the shoreline is in a liminal position, at the circumference but without any defining centre.⁸ Places are not defined. In successive versions of different poems, placenames get substituted: Ithaca for Carthage in "Lives" (L, p. 14; P, p. 41, SP, p. 36), Sirmione for Lake Garda in "A Kensington Notebook" (A, p. 10; SP, p. 91). He himself has assured us that the garage described in "A Garage in Co. Cork" was probably not in Cork at all? The final stanza of that begins "We might be anywhere but are in one place only" (SP, p. 153),¹⁰ an idea echoed twice in "A Lighthouse in Maine", in its opening line and in

It might be anywhere —
Hokkaido, Normandy, Maine;
But it is in Maine. (THN, p. 44)

In SP the second line reads "Hokkaido, Mayo, Maine" (p. 143); as the poem says, it might be anywhere, and the substitution is of little or no import. Hokkaido, Normandy, Mayo, Maine, are equivalents in the gazetteer of anywheres.

Another poem that occurs in two versions is "The Globe in North Carolina". In a seven-stanza version it stands as the closing poem of *Courtyards in Delft* and, with four inserted stanzas and one substituted, it is similarly positioned in *The Hunt by Night*. This shows some affinity to the two verse-letters, "Beyond Howth Head" and "The Sea in Winter". It too is set beside an ocean at night, but embraces a continental, even global scale; it too is a sort of shoreline poem which

8. Cf. Hugh Haughton, "Even now there are places where a thought might grow"; Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon" in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend, Penn.: Seren Books, 1992), pp. 87-120.
9. "Derek Mahon writes...", *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 115 (Winter 1982).
10. In THN the same words occur but are spread out over an additional penultimate stanza, dropped from the later version.

contemplates the great issue of lost or banished gods before switching its focus to the presence of a single individual.

The earth spins to my finger-tips and
Pauses beneath my outstretched hand;
White water seethes against the green
Capes where the continents begin.
Warm breezes move the pines and stir
The hot dust of the piedmont where
Night glides inland From town to town.
I love to see that sun go down. (CD, p. 28, SP, p. 163)

There is an interplay of scale: the world is both itself and a desk-top globe, the speaker is at once in a domestic interior and in inter-planetary space.

Out in the void and staring hard
At the dim stone where we were reared,
Great mother, now the gods have gone,
We place our faith in you alone,
Inverting the procedures which
Knelt us to things beyond our reach. (SP, p. 165)

There is, as emerges in the penultimate stanza, an implicit addressee in **the** poem.

... You lie, an ocean to the east,
Your limbs composed, your mind at rest,
Asleep in a sunrise which will be
Your mid-day when it reaches me;
And what misgivings I might have
About the true importance of
The 'merely human' pale before
The mere fact of your being there. (SP, p. 165)

The move towards companionship is ambiguous. Does that last line assert presence or absence? "Being there" might insist on existence, or it might be pointing to the fact she is "there", an ocean away, as opposed to "here".

The ambiguity is in part a legacy of the revision. In the earlier version, the two preceding stanzas lead directly to the introduction of this invoked addressee, making a clear transition from the cosmic to the particular.

Out in the void and starting hard
At the dim stone where we were reared,
Great mother, now the gods disperse,
We throw ourselves upon your grace,
Inverting the procedures which

Knelt us to things beyond our reach.
Drop of the oceans, may your salt
Astringency redeem our fault!

Its sex is not in question. What
Man would revolve, so rapt in thought,
With such a grave insouciance?—
The dream, embodied in a dance,
Of truant deities who cast
The stars like dice upon a waste
Of gases, then withdrew to blink
At games grown serious; and I think

Of you, an ocean to the east (CD, pp. 28-9)

There is a steady movement from contemplation of the inanimate world, which is then imagined as mothering and female, and as a dream conjured by the dispersing deities. This approach to the feminine leads on to the individual (unnamed) addressee.

In the later version, the stanza beginning "Its sex is not in question" is replaced by:

Veined marble, if we only knew,
In practice as in theory, true
Redemption lies not in the thrust
Of action only, but the trust
We place in our peripheral
Night garden in the glory-hole
Of space, a home from home, and what
Devotion we can bring to it! (SP, p. 165)

This repeats and varies the material of the preceding stanza, but leaves the ensuing transition to the addressee as interruptive. The switch of focus across the Atlantic is rendered abrupt within the context of the later version. However, in the context of Mahon's work generally, the move is less abrupt; the trans-oceanic look is a frequent motif, attempted in the shoreline verse-letters, and achieved imaginatively in other poems such as "Thinking of Inis Oirr in Cambridge, Mass.", "Tractatus", "Ovid in Tomis". One might also mention "Brighton Beach" which, in its second part especially, mimics aspects of Arnold's "Dover Beach".

"Brighton Beach" looks back not only to "Dover Beach", but also to one of Mahon's earliest poems describing an excursion to the shoreline, "Day Trip to Donegal". Perhaps more than any other poem in Night-Crossing, "Day Trip to Donegal" announces what are to be the major themes of Mahon's poetry. Its third stanza foreshadows "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford, taking as its central image not mushrooms but netted fish "flopping about the deck/ In attitudes of agony and heartbreak":

How could we hope to make them understand?
Theirs is a sea-mind, mindless upon land
And dead. Their systematic genocide
(Nothing remarkable that millions died)
To us is a necessity
For ours are land-minds, mindless in the sea. (N-C, p. 22)

In the subsequent printings of the poem in P and *SP*, with "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" already written, this stanza is omitted. It appears that the successful composition of a new poem can have a **retrospective** effect on another.

Mahon's position at the edge reminds us that, as there is no fixed centre, so there is no easily described circumference. This, surely, is the dominant theme of those new poems grouped with "The Sea in Winter" at the end of *Poems 1972-1978*, poems such as "Ford Manor" and "The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush". Contemplating the planes coming in from "Tokyo, New York or Rome" (P, p. 81, *SP*, p. 74) or the proprietor of the Chinese restaurant who "whistles a little tune, dreaming of home" (P, p. 100, *SP*, p. 99), Mahon sees that these too, like himself, are out on the circumference. That does not mean that they share a centre. In "The Poet in Residence" there is an imitation of Corbière's "Le Poete Contumace", shortening it a little and changing the stanza form, but otherwise a close rendering of the original.

He was, in fact, one of life's fugitives,
An amateur hermit blown in with the leaves
Who had lived too long by a southern sea. (*SP*, p. 108)

There are many shoreline poems in Mahon's work. Apart from the ones dealt with here, we might mention "Achill Island" and "Kinsale". But those new pieces added to the end of *Poems 1962-1978* are probably the most characteristic of Mahon's writing to date. It is noticeable that Mahon is one of the few major contemporary Irish poets who has steered clear of the long poem or extended poetic sequence. The longer rhythms of meaning are to be found by looking at the shifting patterns of his poetry as a whole. It is, therefore, a bold reader or editor who would pronounce on the state of the texts. They are in a state of flux. Sometimes the changes improve or clarify; **sometimes** they alter the thrust of the poem. But primarily the changes are not made in the interests of ideological revisionism or a technical tinkering; the point is the **unfixing**, the repeated challenge to insolent ontology. His poetry must be read as a work in constant progress, dedicated to Heraclitus.