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"Harmonies and Disharmonies": Derek Mahon's Francophile Poetics

Derek Mahon's poetry is strikingly eclectic. His work is formally adroit, philosophically and politically aware, intellectually and emotionally shot through with a wide and sympathetic knowledge of international and, in particular, European art. Mahon has produced fine versions of Horace, Ovid and Pasternak; "Courtyards in Delft"¹ is a meditation on a painting by de Hooch while many of his best poems engage the work of such figures as Hamsun, Hopper, Brecht, Uccello, Munch and Wittgenstein. Yet, for practical and temperamental reasons, the art and literature of France exercise the most enduring and substantial influence on Mahon's poetry. He studied French at Dublin University and his familiarity with the literary canon stretches from Villon through Molière to Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Guillevic and Jaccottet. Artistically, Mahon is drawn to the simultaneous hermitism and populism of the French psyche. "Death in the Sun" postulates an affinity with Camus, "A Portrait of the Artist" establishes common ground with van Gogh while the work of Beckett and Joyce, Irish writers who sought refuge in Paris, are significant influences on his poetry.

As an Irish poet who is uncomfortable with the Yeatsian expectations of that tag, Mahon's identification with the "other" that France represents is a liberating tactic.² His characteristic demeanour is that of the outsider, either observing us from a distance or restless at an open window, uneasy in the company of fellow-humans, and his liaison with French literature and art creates a tangible geographical and cultural context in which that position reflects on Ireland. Yet it is important to understand that Mahon's liaison is not a naïve affair and this essay will suggest that the nature of his contact with France is, on the one hand, abrasive and resistant, and on the other, embracing and inclusive. The poetry he produces as a result is defined as much by its divergence from the French source as it is by its likeness to it.

Basically, there are three categories in which the French influence operates: versions, translations and influences. For Mahon, a version permits a certain amount of play with the form and content of the

1. Derek Mahon, *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991), pp. 120-21. All page references in the text are to *Selected Poems* unless otherwise stated.
2. "Harriet Cooke talks to the Poet Derek Mahon", *The Irish Times*, 17 January 1973, p. 10.

original text. Inspired perhaps by Lowell's free association with some of the major poems of the European tradition in *Imitations*, Mahon's versions outline his poetic tastes without confining him to the purpose of the originals. His translations, by comparison, generally constitute a larger enterprise, such as producing a selection of Jaccottet's poems in English. In order to transfer the meaning of a representative body of work into another language, the translator must exercise his licence more prudently. In this case, the sum is greater than the parts. The assimilation of influences is not bound by such considerations though it is more difficult to evaluate how Mahon's knowledge of French painting, philosophy and literature other than poetry affects his writing. Nevertheless, it is in this category, especially through his reading of Camus, that we observe the most significant contact.

"Legacies", Mahon's version of Villon's "Le Lais",³ appears at the end of *Night-Crossing*⁴ and is the first example of this type of contact. The later appearance of this poem in a significantly altered form as "The Condensed Shorter Testament" in *Poems 1962-1978*⁵ and its subsequent excision from the body of work Mahon considers "worth keeping"⁶ exemplifies both the pleasure and problem of the version as a form of liaison. Both of Mahon's texts are qualified by the rider "after Villon" that sanctions a rather loose and amusing interplay with the original. Unlike Peter Dale's translations, Mahon abandons the Villon stanza for a freer eight-line form with four rhymes. The elasticity of versions is further demonstrated when he condenses the legacy into firstly fourteen stanzas and then eleven, idiosyncratically pluralises the first title and then quixotically refers to Villon's "Le Testament" in the revised title when in fact the text is based on "Le Lais".

It is worth considering the significance of the initial version in Mahon's poetic development. *Night-Crossing* charted a difficult severing of affiliations with Ireland. The lyrical pieces that illustrated how proficient Mahon had become at his "trade" grate against the casual, colloquial tendency of "The Prisoner", "First Principles" and "The Poets Lie where they Fell", largely unsuccessful efforts which nevertheless hinted at a creative unease. "Legacies" was a neat codicil to the collection, drawing on Villon's bawdiness and decidedly un-Yeatsian street credibility without the narcissism of the later poems in the book. The re-alignment of Mahon's work into a coherent, retrospective corpus has obviated the need for such a telling gesture. On the other hand, "Beyond Howth Head" (pp. 44-9), "The Sea in Winter"

3. François Villon, *Selected Poems* trans. P. Dale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 12-39.
4. Derek Mahon, *Night-Crossing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 35-8.
5. Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 20-3.
6. "A very European poet", Eileen Battersby interviews Derek Mahon, "Weekend Supplement", *The Irish Times*, 10 November 1992, p. 12.

(pp. 113-18) and *The Yaddo Letter*⁷ are all extended poems which rely heavily on the conversational, irreverent tone and bawdiness of Villon's poetry. In this respect, "Legacies" rehearses a style of poem yet is not itself thematically significant, as if the French text authorises formal experimentation without commanding a commensurate attention to content. Its disappearance from the revised body of work hints at the flaws in the nature of Mahon's long poem enterprises. The sharp-tongued, worldly voice never quite rings true in any of these works although it must be said that Mahon's dramatic adaptation of the bawdy, Bacchanalian voice in his versions of Molière and Euripides has been largely successful.

In terms of offering an insight into the original work of the interpreter, the scope and freedom afforded by versions are also their limitation. A case in point for Mahon is his handling of two Corbière poems, "Le poète contumace" and "Au vieux Roscoff", entitled "The Poet in Residence" and "Old Roscoff" (pp. 128-29) respectively.⁸ The former is retitled "Beyond the Pale" (pp. 107-10) in *Selected Poems* but was originally collected in *Poems 1962-1978* as one of twenty new poems that included three translations of Jaccottet as well as "The Sea in Winter". The scene is recognisable Mahon territory:

A feral poet lived in the one-eyed tower,
His wings clipped, having settled there
Among vigilant and lugubrious owls.

We are familiar with this aloof, almost wretched, distance from the world guaranteeing some privacy, not to mention a degree of mystery.

The poem is uncharacteristically circumlocutory, achieving some semblance of purpose only when the poet tears up the letter he has written. Mahon has already incorporated the circling tactics of love into one of the most accomplished of his early pieces, "Preface to a Love Poem" (p. 14); here, the inability to grasp the nettle is endemic to Corbière's rather descriptive and superficial original. Although Mahon condenses the original and gives it a more uniform construction his relaxation of Corbière's varied but restrictive rhyme schemes does not energise his version. Corbière's chopped, *staccato* rhythms are replaced by a free-flowing, unsatisfying prosaic narrative. Instead of

Les femmes avaient su — sans doute par les buses —
Qu'il vivait en concubinage avec des Muses! ...
Un hérétique enfin ... Quelque Parisien

7. Derek Mahon, *The Yaddo Letter* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1992).

8. Tristan Corbière, *Les Amours Jaunes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 64-70 and pp. 185-86.

De Paris ou d'ailleurs. — Hélas! on n'en sait rien. —
 Il était invisible; et comme *ses Donzelles*
Ne s'affichaient pas trop, on ne se parla plus d'elles.

we get

The women, though, were not slow to discover
 That this barely visible recluse
 Shared the place with a lover
 Whom he referred to as his 'Muse' —
 Parisians, no doubt, the pair of them!
 But she lay low, and the storm blew over.

The autobiographical significance of the original is lost in Mahon's version and apart from re-affirming a favourite poetic posture, the poem remains one-dimensional.

A similar sense of unfulfilment is experienced with "Old Roscoff". Included in *Courtyards in Delft*,⁹ it was one of only two poems from that book that did not appear in *The Hunt by Night* though it is reclaimed for *Selected Poems*.¹⁰ Again, Mahon homogenises Corbière's mixed quartets and sestets into four octets, shedding ten lines in the process. The poem is descriptive and its characteristic note is one of mild nostalgia. No longer a "Bolt-hole of brigandage, old keep/ of piracy", Roscoff in the latter half of the nineteenth century has become a sleepy town, a "berceuse", whose overgrown cannon are the sole reminders of a belligerent, maritime past. Abandoned by history, it qualifies as one of those places "where a thought might grow". In this respect, Mahon's attraction to Roscoff is explicable. On another level, he evidently shares with Corbière an attachment to the northern towns of the Brittany coast — Roscoff, Morlaix, Saint-Brieuc.

The shifting focus and multi-layered texture of a selected poems permits the re-inclusion of "Old Roscoff". Undoubtedly, the tighter thematic demands of a regular collection led to its exclusion from *The Hunt by Night* but it is more difficult to explain the presence of "from *The Drunken Boat*" (pp. 80-81) (after Rimbaud's "Le bateau ivre") in the same book.¹¹ This is perhaps his most accomplished version. He virtually abandons himself to the powerful current of Rimbaud's French, cascading headlong on an active, vibrant rhythm and through a host of exotic images. Mahon's vocabulary tumbles, relieved of the "phlegmatic" and the "quotidian", content to "let the current carry" him while the image of the boat, ungoverned and at the mercy of the elements, recalls and is undermined by the nightmarish end of "Day Trip to Donegal" (p. 21). Mahon's contradictory attraction to such

9. Derek Mahon, *Courtyards in Delft* (Dublin: Gallery, 1981), p. 20.

10. Derek Mahon, *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

11. Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies* (Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1978), pp. 165-68.

abandon is reinforced in "Preface to a Love Poem" where he is happy "Drifting inconsequently among islands".

Although Mahon's erudite vocabulary checks the version with words like "Viridian", "eructations" and "prescience", the overall effect is one of almost unrestrained pleasure in the language. The quasi-conversational rhythm of his own poetry is regularised and his philosophical precision and guardedness is submerged in a sensual barrage of images. It is quite unlike anything Mahon has published before and relates only to "The Joycentenary Ode" (pp. 145-48) in *The Hunt by Night*.

In this respect, Rimbaud's bohemian delight in the sensualities of language suggests the possibility of a similar strain in Mahon's poetry, one that he shows glimpses of in "Legacies" and that is hinted at by his penchant for the vernacular. Indeed, his paradoxical habit of employing words more associated with academic theses and philosophical tracts testifies to his desire to expand poetic vocabulary. The most extreme example of this is "The Joycentenary Ode", his Finneganese homage to Joyce.

Nonetheless, the abrupt and telescopic ending of "from *The Drunken Boat*" rejects the exotic in favour of the banality, uncertainty and familiarity of Europe:

Meuse of the cloud-canals, I would ask of you
Only the pond where, on a quiet evening,
An only child launches a toy canoe
As frail and pitiful as a moth in spring.

Drained by the sensory overload of his drunken voyage, Rimbaud yearns for the quotidian experience that invests with symbolic potential the child's launch of a toy canoe. In a moment that both recalls and reverses his hypothetical participation in de Hooch's "The Courtyard of a House in Delft", Mahon promotes imagination over experience. Personalisation of the painting in "Courtyards in Delft" is an imaginative coup that connects the Dutch canvas to the historical analysis that closes the poem. In "from *The Drunken Boat*", the unrealised potential of the imagination is preferred to the experience it might beget as the poet withdraws to a time before creative consummation.

The intersection between version and translation may be regarded as one of the most fertile types of Mahon's liaison with French literature. His Rimbaud allows us glimpse a style that he chooses not to employ elsewhere. His contact with the poetry of Gérard de Nerval, on the other hand, provides an established context for one of the most important themes in Mahon's poetry. "The Mute Phenomena" (p. 64), which originally appeared as "After Nerval" in *The Snow Party*, is an

upbeat, worldly-wise version of Nerval's "Vers dorés" that upbraids humankind for the narrowness and arrogance of its consciousness.¹² Mahon takes great liberties with the original, maintaining the sonnet length while relaxing the rhyme scheme, and effectively writes a different poem in a brisk, late twentieth-century language of indignation. The classical, measured though not sanctimonious tone of the French succumbs to an almost gung-ho statement of fact:

Your great mistake is to disregard the satire
 Banded among the mute phenomena.
 Be strong if you must, your brusque hegemony
 Means fuck-all to the somnolent sun-flower
 Or the extinct volcano. What do you know
 Of the revolutionary theories advanced
 By turnips, or the sex-life of cutlery?
 Everything is susceptible, Pythagoras said so.

This sounds like Nerval talking through Villon. A profound view is expressed through a highly-charged vernacular, fleshing out poetic substance in an accessible, colloquial language. In other words, the playfulness, rebelliousness and populism of Villon is married to what Terence Brown identifies as "tragic gravitas, an eloquent sorrow for a world in chaos".¹³ The impulse to be both entertaining and meaningful is swamped by the artifice of the verse letter. Here the imperative of illustrating the folly of a constrained consciousness invites a snappy, hard-hitting style.

The latitude Mahon allows himself in "The Mute Phenomena" is only one of three important aspects to his handling of "Vers dorés". The extent of this latitude is underlined by "Pythagorean Lines", his reworking of the same poem for what the publisher calls his "version of *Les Chimères*".¹⁴ In fact, this is much more a translation of Nerval. It is one thing to use an individual poem as a launch pad for a succinct expression of a philosophy, it is quite another to translate a sequence of poems where the original authorial intent and development can neither be disregarded nor extensively disrupted. This is a necessary limitation of such an exercise yet the impulse to produce and persevere with the project reaffirms Mahon's artistic affinity with Nerval.

The linguistic and tonal disparities between the version and translation are considerable. Compare the octet of "Pythagorean Lines" with that of "The Mute Phenomena" quoted above:

12. Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères* (Geneva and Paris: Droz and Minard, 1969), p. 79.
13. Terence Brown, "Home and Away: Derek Mahon's France", in *Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship*, ed. by B. Hayley and C. Murray (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1992), p. 150.
14. Derek Mahon, *The Chimeras* (Dublin: Gallery, 1982), p. 20.

Man, do you think yourself the one reflective
Thing in this lively world? Your urgent guile
Works blithely on its raw material,
But you ignore the spiritual perspective.

Respect the dog's life and the worm's-eye view:
Each flower in nature is an open soul.
Love lives even in the zinc of a zinc bowl:
Everything feels, and leaves its mark on you.

Within the framework of *Les Chimères*, however, "Vers dorés" is a culminating moment of release and the preceding process of pain and discovery is one with which Mahon identifies. The first poem, "El Desdichado", meaning "The Disinherited One" in Spanish, provides another typical moment of desperation and isolation:

I am the widower — dim, disconsolate —
The Aquitanian prince in the ruined tower.¹⁵

The first sonnet in the sequence, "Christ on the Mount of Olives", depicts a visionary moment with poetic parallels which the sleeping disciples do not experience:

When the Lord, raising to heaven his wasted hands
Within the sacred grove, as poets do,
Abstracted in his silent sorrow, knew
Himself abandoned by his faithless friends,

He turned to those still sleeping there, each head
Sunk in its dream of thrones and prophecies
— But stupidly, as in a brute repose —,
And lifted up his voice: "There is no God!"¹⁶

Not only does this passage indicate a Christian sympathy in Mahon that values the struggle and the hard-won epiphany, it identifies a correlative between religious suffering and artistic anxiety. The poet, like Christ, is abandoned, a marginalised figure who shares little in common with his so-called friends.

This marginalisation culminates in the articulation of an objective view in "Vers dorés". For Nerval, as for Baudelaire in "Correspondence",¹⁷ the construct of a susceptible, inanimate phenomena is a symbolical device positing a spiritual and moral world that corresponds to the solely material one in which we live. Mahon's employment of this construct is motivated by a similar despair but his *modus operandi* is not symbolist. Baudelaire's correspondences are

15. Ibid., p. 9.

16. Ibid., p. 15.

17. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Larousse, 1973), p. 19.

primarily sensory, his symbolism an endeavour to rekindle our capacity to take pleasure in the world. Mahon's metaphysic, on the other hand, is philosophical and political insofar as his metaphors keep their correlatives in view and the predominantly humanist impulses of his poems must always be satisfied. In other words, Mahon is concerned with how we behave in the world and his dramatisation of that condition cannot end in the abstract. The overwhelming sense of unease he depicts in "The Studio" (p. 30) reflects on a claustrophobic, artificial world where humankind dominates nature. "Lives" (pp. 36-8) delineates a series of Buddhist-like reincarnations whose end is threatened only by a contemporary manifestation as an anthropologist. A moderated version of human interference motivates "Table Talk" (p. 139) and "Ovid in Tomis" (pp. 181-86). The crucial factor here is the creation of a perspective. The distant observation, the view from the window, the ventriloquism of the inanimate, the Beckettian voice from the grave, all enable Mahon's poetics.

Mahon's transmutation of Nerval in "The Mute Phenomena" is pronounced and extensive. His translations of the poems of Philippe Jaccottet offer a more expansive, continuous and modulated interaction with French literature. Although Brown is correct in suggesting that Mahon's attraction to the work of Jaccottet "is as much a discovery of otherness as it is the identification of a poetic double",¹⁸ they share to a large degree an aesthetic of isolation, self-deprecation, doubt and a never-realised tendency towards silence.

Mahon's introduction to Jaccottet's *Selected Poems*¹⁹ sheds as much light on his own poetics as it does on Jaccottet's. Surprisingly perhaps, Mahon does not share Jaccottet's trove of "elemental, pre-Socratic" symbols. For his part, Jaccottet does not entertain the pantheism of Nerval and Baudelaire. If he does not choose to invest the mute phenomena with an anima, Jaccottet at least shares with Mahon a comparable attention to the minute, the insignificant and the forgotten. According to Mahon, Jaccottet possesses what Nabakov described as "that real sense of beauty which has less to do with art than with the constant readiness to discern the halo round the frying-pan"; the same quotation is used of Mahon by John Byrne when he says that "Mahon is responsive to the imaginative potential in the ordinary and concrete".²⁰ Comparing Jaccottet to Pierre Bonnard, Mahon implies that his vision "transforms the quotidian into the marvellous".

18. Brown, p. 151.

19. Philippe Jaccottet, *Selected Poems* selected and translated by Derek Mahon (London: Viking, 1988).

20. John Byrne, "Derek Mahon: A Commitment to Change", *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1983), p. 62.

Mahon's consanguinity with Jaccottet has its limitations and in identifying difference one uncovers a type of contrapuntal or catalytic influence. Terence Brown observes that Mahon, "the poet of coast-lines, of sea-sounds, of departures and arrivals" — hence his attraction to Corbière — is aware of the land-locked, practically sea-less nature of Jaccottet's poems. Mahon's horizon is a Ulyssean one for sailing towards, Jaccottet's a virtually anonymous, Beckettian fact. Mahon strives for knowledge, Jaccottet for the conditions in which one may acquire it.

Given the variety of Mahon's perspectives, it is also worth noting that Jaccottet's poetry has discarded the traditional forms of *L'Effraie*,²¹ mutating into the freer, often unrhymed though metrically conventional poems of *L'Ignorant*,²² from which Mahon took the first four poems he translated, "The Gipsies"²³ and "The Voice", "Ignorance" and "Words in the Air" (pp. 82-3), to the minimalist, unpunctuated work of *Airs*.²⁴ While there are parallel developments in Mahon's work, he is more concerned to maintain a multiplicity of voices and views. Jaccottet is more single-minded, perhaps closer to the "systematic" Beckett than he imagines. But Mahon's departures and liaisons are intent on opening up vistas and he is not willing to relinquish the creative fecundity of this approach. In any one of his books one is likely to find a range of forms, tones and voices so that an accomplished villanelle, "The Dawn Chorus" (p. 137), with its elaborate rhyme scheme and Jungian meditations, is surrounded in *The Hunt by Night* by "Rock Music" and "Table Talk", two poems that disparagingly allude to poetry as "obsolete bumf" and "an ephemeral stream of literature".²⁵ Mahon secures a perspective in the context of others, Jaccottet does so by excluding them. Mahon entertains the possibility of silence and reductive opinions of literature as a reactive device whereas Jaccottet's poetry tends in every way towards the abyss only to draw back from it. In other words, the futility of human discourse and artistic enterprise is a theme for Jaccottet whereas, for Mahon, it is merely a symptom. Jaccottet facilitates a diagnosis whereas Mahon seeks to alleviate the problem. Thus, the rational, philosophical side cedes to one that is practically engaged.

In the poem "Autrefois, / moi l'effrayé, l'ignorant, vivant à peine",²⁶ which Mahon translates as "Afraid, ignorant, scarcely alive", Jaccottet mocks himself for the presumption of his poetic efforts "to guide the dead and the dying" and he realises that the images he employs are a

21. Philippe Jaccottet, *L'Effraie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

22. Philippe Jaccottet, *L'Ignorant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

23. Derek Mahon, *The Snow Party* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 24.

24. Philippe Jaccottet, *Airs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

25. *The Hunt by Night*, pp. 25-7.

26. Jaccottet, *Selected Poems*, p. 94.

protective measure for himself. Divested of this delusion, he is ready to start in earnest:

Now, my lamp extinguished,
my hand more shaky, wandering,
I slowly start again in the open air.

Although Mahon too can merely arrive at this threshold, as in "A Lighthouse in Maine" (pp. 142-43), he is more often able and willing to cross it. Like Jaccottet, he questions the validity of poetry and there is nothing gratuitous about his doubts, yet he is able in "Ovid in Tomis" (pp. 181-86) to exhaust the rationale of this uncertainty:

Better to contemplate
The blank page
And leave it blank

Than modify
Its substance by
So much as a pen-stroke.

Woven of wood-nymphs,
It speaks volumes
No-one will ever write.

I incline my head
To its candour
And weep for our exile.

Although thematically and formally Mahon has engaged the same principles as Jaccottet, it is fair to say that his aim is a more thorough examination of the subject. Where the French poet is often content to open up a vista or adumbrate a metaphorical connection, Mahon is generally more imperative and empirical. His metaphysic is a tried and tested one that insists on the poet eventually quitting the ivory tower of the imagination.

Mahon's interest in painting and painters and his employment of these in his art reveals a highly sophisticated metaphorical technique (see Brown above, pp. 38-50). Several of his poems are directly inspired by paintings, there are numerous references and allusions to Botticelli, van Gogh and Munch while the covers of four of his last five books have been illustrated with works by Munch, Botticelli, Uccello and Ernst. "A Portrait of the Artist" (p. 20), previously entitled "Van Gogh among the Miners" in *Night-Crossing* and "Van Gogh in the Borinage" in *Poems 1962-1978*, implies that the pantheism Mahon shares with Nerval and Baudelaire is a painterly device. Again, Mahon is attracted to the marginalised figure of the artist, in this case, the Dutch painter who has been "discharged" from his religious

studies. As "God gutters down to metaphor", so van Gogh's experience among the "caged Belgian miners" of the Borinage will be transformed into the domestic scenes and landscapes of Arles when he goes "south/ To paint what I have seen":

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

This artistic transmutation of the banal into the extraordinary is effectively a definition of metaphor and it emphasises the need for the "other". In van Gogh's case, the freedom presented by France as "other" liberates the potent metaphors of his northern experience in a therapeutic fashion. For Mahon, the intellectual and civil liberty represented by France activates a metaphysical disposition.

His interpretation of van Gogh exemplifies the attentiveness of his critical eye; we witness an even more deliberate explication of de Hooch in "Courtyards in Delft". Yet Mahon's imaginative interaction with paintings is not restrictively interpretative. He has cited the work of Raoul Dufy as an influence on his poetry, particularly discernible in the poem, "Kinsale" (p. 191).²⁷ Alfred Werner has noted that "Dufy's pictorial world definitely excludes the sordid, sad, or tragic" and that "he seems devoid of social conscience".²⁸ Dufy's exuberant style, his light canvases, watercolours and gouaches depicting scenes of harbours, yachts and race-courses might appear anathema to the melancholic gravitas of Mahon, yet it is precisely his ability to transform the world through art and into art that connects their work.

Dufy himself explains the impulse behind an art-centred art:

The marks he [the aquarellist] makes on the paper reveal the shape and movement more than these things [the objects] do themselves; in this way is born the miracle of transfiguration of the world into images, out of the simple ability of the artist to create them.²⁹

This identifies an important difference between the arts of poetry and painting. The painter's image is physically self-referential whereas the poet's depends upon his employment of language. Hence, the minuscule, pared-down scenarios of Jaccottet are incomplete images since the poems often do not possess sufficient impetus to bring them beyond suggestion or diagnosis. Mahon's integration of van Gogh's and Dufy's principles implies that an art that has no intent beyond the

27. In a lecture and slide-show, "A Poet Looks at Paintings", in the National Gallery of Ireland, 6 March 1990.

28. Alfred Werner, *Dufy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 8.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

act of creation lacks wholeness. His interpretation of van Gogh identifies artistic technique and implies a purpose beyond art but his deployment of Dufy's work deliberately invests it with existential significance.

"Kinsale" juxtaposes the beguiling possibilities of "a future forbidden to no-one" and the "deep-delving, dark, deliberate" past that is the subject of so much of his poetry. Here is an existential moment of possibility between the last of the rain and the commencement of the future, an opportunity to act:

... but today
our sky-blue slates are steaming in the sun,
our yachts tinkling and dancing in the bay
like race-horses.

The rain of a destructive history has ceased and Mahon enlists the optimism of Dufy to capture the moment. We are reminded of paintings such as "The Port of Le Havre", "Harbour at Deauville", "Amphititre" and "Races at Goodwood".³⁰ Although Mahon brings Dufy into a philosophical context here, the implication is that a self-defining art, devoid of such intent, is political in spite of itself. Mahon's optimism here is checked slightly by the static, Beckettian ending:

We contemplate at last
shining windows, a future forbidden to no-one.

This attraction to an unencumbered art explains his exploitation of Bashō whose haiku Mahon subsumes in an historically-charged context in "The Snow Party" (p. 57). In other words, Mahon responds to art and not necessarily to the nature that art purports to represent, though that response refers beyond the bounds of art. In Mahon's work the "insistence is upon the world of art; nature as the hand-maiden of art".³¹ He is therefore drawn to Dufy's art and to the possibilities that art creates for his own work. Art becomes a school for nature.

Mahon's poetry has also been particularly responsive to the work of Samuel Beckett, like himself, an Irish protestant, educated at Trinity College, Dublin, who found in France a degree of artistic liberty and inspiration. Mahon's affinity with Beckett is important though one should not over-estimate it. Mahon spent a year as a student in France; Beckett taught and lived on and off for a number of years in Paris before moving there more or less permanently in 1937 and he eventually began to write in French. This assimilation of French culture may seem to be the logical end of Mahon's enterprise whereas, by contrast, Beckett's novels and plays retain a markedly Irish character.

30. Ibid., pp. 53, 107, 109 and 97.

31. Byrne, p. 69.

By leaving Ireland, Beckett turned his native country into an "other" and Brown suggests that for Mahon, "Belfast begins to seem indeed a kind of otherness itself, as the grim ineluctable alternative to alternatives".³² Beckett's influence on Mahon is in this respect predominantly cultural and this affinity explains similarities in their aesthetics, Mahon being closer to Beckett's "bleak reductio" than to Joyce's "language beyond art". Mahon's brand of minimalist poetry employs a pared-down version of his own language whereas in "The Joycentenary Ode" he apes Joyce's Finneganesse and the ebullience of that language is precisely what is absent in his other work, except in "from *The Drunken Boat*", where it is so surprising.

Mahon's first allusion to Beckett, in "Exit Molloy", the fourth and final section of "Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieuc" (pp. 16-17), depicts the eponymous anti-hero of Beckett's novel dying (or dead) in a ditch from where he can see the town. The poem's ending encapsulates two of the most enduring moments from Beckett — "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on"³³ and the finale of *Waiting for Godot*

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.
*They do not move.*³⁴

It is precisely "Now, at the end" when, "Strictly speaking I am already dead", that moments from previous parts of the sequence are resurrected by the closing line's negation of finality, "But still I can hear the birds sing on over my head". Of course, in *Waiting for Godot*, the ending is a roles-reversed repeat of the end of Act I; we can assume that, as Godot is unlikely to come, the same scenario will be repeated endlessly. There is almost a bloody-minded refusal to expire in Beckett. For Mahon, that reprieve is one which, like Jaccottet, he is prepared to exploit. Silence is a purgative but not an end in itself except insofar as it is the one ineluctable end.

"An Image from Beckett" (pp. 34-5) is the first instance of a more sustained presence of the Beckett influence. Taken from *Lives*,³⁵ it is the formal genesis of the title poem of that collection which in turn relates to the later "Ovid in Tomis" and "Tithonus" (pp. 168-72). The version of the poem that originally appeared is three stanzas longer and contains reference to Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et Le Noir* and the speaker's "one marriage [that]/ Was over as

32. Brown, p. 147.

33. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959), p. 418.

34. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 94.

35. Derek Mahon, *Lives* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

soon as it started" as well as a hint at the location of the "northern landscape" as "(Danish?)". Yet these clues do not facilitate a coherent interpretation of the poem. The identity of the speaker — is it Beckett or Mahon — is not satisfactorily established, the "sweetness and light" of the narrative is balanced by a reductive optimism tinged with resignation, the burial of generations begets only a "subliminal bat-squeak/ of reflex lamentation" while life's "Biblical span" of seventy years is reduced to the time "Required to drop six feet", a mere "instant" in the history of "civilizations". The apocalyptic mood that characterises *Lives* is captured by the sense of finiteness of the final lines:

To whom in my will,
This, I have left my will.
I hope they have time,
And light enough, to read it.

It is as if Mahon is trying to come to terms with such Beckett themes as the relentless onset of the end, the Bible,³⁶ the ambiguity of light as a symbol, the voice beyond death. The poem successfully conveys the idea that human civilisation will not last for ever but beyond this the poem's purpose is obscure. Nonetheless one can discern the germs of an argument that is elaborated in "Lives" and extensively pursued in both "Ovid in Tomis" and "Tithonus" as the poet-speaker bears witness to history and either heralds or records a time beyond human civilisation. As with Jaccottet, Mahon takes a basic idea and in utilising it within his own poetic transforms it extensively. Thus, for Beckett, the voice from the grave of the Unnamable is the next step after death, the exhaustion of speech. For Mahon, the potential of that voice persisting is mythological and therefore humanist. The speaking statue of Ovid is superseded by the bodiless voice of Tithonus who continues to exist in a world of darkness, yet this imagined monologue is more a warning than a premonition.

Where Beckett prepares for silence and Jaccottet starts again with a gesture that is not supported by action, Mahon employs metaphors that are reflective and purposeful. To a degree, Mahon explores the metaphorical possibilities presented by Beckett's endings as if he is ready to leave that momentarily shared aesthetic space as soon as Beckett occupies it. However, his departure is tangential to Beckett's direction. The endurance of the Beckett voice underlines a pessimistic viewpoint whereas Mahon's Tithonus earnestly yearns to be free of what he must realise is inescapable:

36. Cf. *Rhinoceros*, p. 84, on the influence of the Church of Ireland on Beckett and Mahon.

Perhaps I shall die
At long last,
Face in the dust —

Having seen,
Not that I asked,
The light in the desert.

Mahon differs most fundamentally from Beckett in his faith in humanity. His liaison with Beckett's work is abrasive in that regard and it is not surprising that he should find a more accommodating French spirit in Albert Camus. "Death and the Sun" (pp. 192-94) is the final poem in *Selected Poems* and may be read as an index of Mahon's poetic themes and philosophy. Camus personifies for him the individual's dogged, isolated stance in the face of an increasingly homogenous and hostile world. He is the light-dispensing "Diogenes in the dog-house". Mahon's deliberate refusal to embrace the comforts of the Irish literary scene, his consequent poetic affinity with international art and the peripheral perspectives he adopts in his work underline his attraction to the ostracised or excluded individual, in this case represented by Camus whose "life and death [were] a work of art".

Thus, "Death and the Sun" functions both as a tribute to the life and art of Camus and as a concentrate of the basic metaphor of Mahon's work, that of moving from the darkness of ignorance to the light of perception. He utilises Camus to investigate the complexities of Northern Ireland, suggesting parallels with Algeria, and most significantly, reduces the sectarian conflict to individual dimensions so that his symbolic "troglodyte" is an Ulster derivative of Mersault from *The Outsider*,³⁷ his political *impasse* an existentialist problem.

Mahon's identification with Camus is the least resistant of all his liaisons since Camus is employed as a symbol. "Death and the Sun" establishes a personal relation through a temporal bond as the poet reconstructs his activities at the moment of Camus's death in a road accident and later imagines that he was watching on television "Gunfights under a blinding desert sun" while Camus's body lay in the *mairie*. By positing this artistic fraternity, Mahon legitimises his own scrutiny of the political and social situation in Ulster. Likewise, this allows the application of the existential morals of *The Outsider*, *The Plague*³⁸ and *The Fall*³⁹ to the affairs of Northern Ireland. Stanza two conflates Camus and Mersault to suggest a personal and political course of action whereby the artist can strike out "a back-stroke, as far as he [can] go". This echoes *Night-Crossing* in which Mahon departs

37. Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. J. Laredo (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

38. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (London: Penguin, 1960).

39. Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. J. Laredo (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

from Belfast and where the sea is an ambiguous symbol of liberation. The infestation of rats that afflicts Oran in *The Plague* is also transformed into an omen for pre-1969 Northern Ireland where the poet's "we", presumably the Protestant community, "never imagined the plague to come,/ So long had it crouched there in the dark".

Whatever the appropriateness of this usage, the poem's metaphorical narrative justifies Mahon's application of Camus's work. Basically, the metaphor develops from the initial "frank composure" of a non-aligned stance, a deliberate breaking of ties, to the detached engagement of the artist utilising metaphor, to the eventual emergence of a learned and won truth. For Camus, this development is reflected in the novels; for Mahon, a parallel progression may be identified in the three stages represented by *Night-Crossing*, *Lives to Poems 1962-1978*, and *The Hunt by Night* and *Antarctica*. In other words, the poem's procedure is a paradigm of how Mahon has developed as a poet.

More specifically, this procedure outlines a way of reading a Mahon poem since it reflects the narrative structure of his most successful pieces. Firstly, a perspective is established. Secondly, the subject is engaged. Thirdly, and this is what separates him most notably from Jaccottet, we experience the epiphanous stage, the moment of realisation, indeed, of knowledge. In "Death and the Sun", Mahon creates the perspective from which one may read the Ulster situation through the art of Camus. This parallelism constitutes the metaphorical relationship in which Mahon engages the subject in depicting "Wee shadows fighting in a smoky cave". Finally, we are asked to "Imagine [that] Plato's neolithic troglodyte" is free from his "dark cinema", and stands

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 ...

In his poetry, Mahon's most commonly engaged subject is the individual's consciousness. We are not promised anything like Christian redemption nor are we doomed to interminable survival in a purposeless world. What we learn through that engagement deepens our consciousness and the perspective afforded in Mahon's work by contact with the literature and art of France refines the "rich despair" of knowledge in a world abandoned by the gods.