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Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging

And who would trade self-knowledge for
A prelapsarian metaphor,
Love-play of the ironic conscience
For a prescriptive innocence?

Derek Mahon, "Beyond Howth Head"

The answer to the rhetorical question posed in the above epigraph is clearly "no one". "Beyond Howth Head" sets up a clear polarity between "self-knowledge" on the one hand and "prelapsarian metaphor" on the other.¹ But in Mahon's work as a whole the individual's pursuit of artistic statement can not so easily be wrested from collective history. Self-knowledge and prelapsarian metaphor can not be exchanged unproblematically. Rather, the "ironic conscience" uses metaphor to propose a brief continuity between the antithetical categories of self-knowledge and home and then destroys the metaphor to separate the categories again. It is this sticking point which can give a clue to the question of belonging as it is expressed in Mahon's poems. By not completely separating art and history, himself and his people, Mahon professes some kind of allegiance — no matter how much he qualifies it — to the idea of an overlap between these antithetical areas.

Who are Mahon's people and how does he write about them? To date, readings of his poems have tended to be either along sectarian or else along formal lines. Because they are mutually exclusive such readings do not link the form of the poems with the issue of belonging and thus fail to grasp an important part of the essence of Mahon's work. Edna Longley, for example, has written of Mahon's scepticism as being the sign of a Protestant poet.² The idea of scepticism had already been used to good effect by Terence Brown in his study of Louis MacNeice.³ While MacNeice is often mentioned in connection

1. This quotation comes from the version in *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
2. Edna Longley, "Edna Longley on Derek Mahon", *Fortnight*, 211 (December 1984-January 1985), pp. 17-18. See also Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), pp. 188-92; and Edna Longley, "Louis MacNeice: 'The Walls are Flowing'", in *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland*, ed. Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley (Belfast: Blackstaff; Dover, New Hampshire: Blackstaff, 1985), p. 99.
3. Terence Brown, *Northern Voices* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 105. Also "Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of Exile", *Twentieth Century Studies*, 4 (November 1970), pp. 78-88.

with Mahon, in their relationship to Protestantism and to Northern Ireland they differ in important ways. To identify scepticism with Protestantism and both with Mahon would make it easy to stop short with an assessment of his work which would present him as an alienated Protestant poet, cut off from the sense of community assumed to be the inheritance of other poets elsewhere in Ireland. Such an identification does not elucidate his relationship to his people. In the short examination of Mahon's poems which follows I take Mahon's people as the starting point. Why is it that the shape of some poems derives from, while refusing to be restricted to, his relationship to his people?

To turn to the formal readings of the poetry: Mahon, referring to his poems, himself resorts to the word "construction".⁴ Reviewers have also picked out the constructed and controlled elements of his poetry, but without saying what he is trying to construct or why.⁵ One reviewer has said that some of the connections between Mahon's ideas are tenuous and whimsical while other critics have said that he is more interested in his diction than in what he is saying.⁶ It is probably true to say that at times the poems seem more interested in "the faint music of their own diction" than in any ostensible subject matter.⁷ But there is a reason for this. Mahon himself reveals what he thinks poetry should *not* be when he distances himself from the critical orthodoxy which grew up around the followers of Yeats's Celtic Twilight school. Their "assumptions and credulities were those of the Irish country people of the time, and the Irish, for many years, returned the poets' reverence with reverence for a poetry which evaded the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source".⁸ In Mahon's case the openly articulated problem of belonging or not belonging to a people is one of the main sources of metaphysical unease. One writer does put his finger on the reason for the formalism of the poems when he concludes a review by saying, "whatever the consolations of Mahon's poetry (...) its ground note is always misgiving".⁹ The formal control points to something which is more

4. Derek Mahon, "Ecrire en Ulster", *Lettres Nouvelles*, March 1973. Also "Harriet Cooke Talks to the Poet Derek Mahon", *Irish Times*, 17 January 1973, p. 10.
5. Basil Payne, *Studies*, 58, Spring 1969, p. 76; Philip Hobsbaum, "Derek Mahon" in *Contemporary Poets*, ed. James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1975), p. 985; Gerald Dawe, "Sweet Discourses", *Honest Ulsterman*, 69 (June-October 1981), p. 67; Maurice Harmon, *Irish University Review*, 12, No. 1 (Spring 1982), p. 103; John Byrne, "Derek Mahon: A Commitment to Change", *Crane Bag*, 6, No. 1 (1982), p. 64.
6. Anthony Thwaite, "At the point of speech", *TLS*, 7 November 1975, p. 1327. See also Dawe and Hobsbaum in the preceding note.
7. Donald Hall, *Contemporary American Poetry*, second edition (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 28-9. I have borrowed Donald Hall's remark about the 'fifties' well-made poem.
8. Derek Mahon, *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (London: Sphere, 1972), p. 12.
9. Neil Corcoran, "Flying the Private Kite", *TSL* 18 February 1983, p. 160.

than a game: it re-enacts the troubled relations between art and history and between poet and people.

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A comparison of two very different poems about Belfast can illustrate the complexity of Mahon's attitude to his city. One by Louis MacNeice, is titled "Belfast" while the other, by Derek Mahon, has been successively titled "Poem in Belfast", "In Belfast" and "The Spring Vacation".¹⁰ The changing titles in themselves illustrate Mahon's gradual shift away from MacNeice as an influence and his reluctance to adopt a fixed distance in relation to the city of his youth. Mahon himself has said of MacNeice that his attempts to establish an Irish persona are not very convincing since he could not be exiled from something he never belonged to by class or religion.¹¹ MacNeice's alienation from Belfast is relatively simple and thus less interesting than Mahon's exile.¹²

The speaker of MacNeice's "Belfast" maintains a fixed and aloof distance from the city he presents. The only place where the narrator speaks in person is in the description of the Catholic church, a place which can be looked into but not entered. His awkward distance is apparent in the use of the first person plural and in the cumbersome, passive syntax:

In the porch of the chapel (...)
Lies a bunch of limbs glimpsed in the cave of gloom
By us who walk in the streets so buoyantly and glib.

Another cumbersome construction is used in the last stanza, this time a relative clause, indicating a sympathy on the part of the narrator for the martyred woman, but also indicating his distance:

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

By contrast, Mahon's narrator is from the start among his people:

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

10. In *Twelve Poems*, (Belfast: Queen's University, 1965); *Night-Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); *Poems 1962-78*, respectively.
11. Derek Mahon, "MacNeice in England and Ireland", in *Time Was Away*, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974), p. 117.
12. For a discussion of place in Mahon's poetry, see 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*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1992).

Walking among his own he is also on his own for he is sandwiched between shower and shower. Because he is associated with bright sunlight the implication is that his own, associated with the word "wet", here in a strong rhyming position, are part of the darkness. The words "resume" and "once more" mean that from a position of enlightenment he returns to his original darkness. To belong to his people he must forgo his reason. Remembering not to forget, he deals with them circumspectly. The implicit meaning of the contrast between light and dark, reason and unreason, is made explicit in the next stanza:

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 —

The closed mistrusting religion of the "squinting heart" is now contrasted with an alternative sketched by the narrator ("keeping an eye on the hill"). In a shift from the first person singular to the plural, he throws in his lot with that of his people. But the attempt turns out to be doomed — the weight of the "unwieldy images" is too much, as the internal rhyme between "unwieldy" and "yield" shows.

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.

The act of resumption of the opening of the poem is now reversed as the narrator withdraws and assumes the first person singular again:

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.

The implication here is not simply that another part of his mind can be insubordinate, like that of the fallen angels. It is that he must live with a divided mind.

Mahon's narrator, unlike MacNeice's, knows the city from the inside — the interiors ("the kitchen houses") and the hidden places ("the echoing back-streets") — but in the final pair of lines he expresses a detached sense of duty towards it. It is as if he were a visitor or someone watching it on the news feeling he ought to feel moral outrage. The things that happen in Belfast should engage more

than his casual interest but don't. However, this denial, abolishing all the metaphors of weather and of Calvinist theology, is not the end. The very last line, while seeming to emphasise the narrator's lack of interest by repeating certain words, actually introduces a new element. It seems that the happenings in Belfast should exact more interest than casual pity. An unexpected financial metaphor is slipped in with the pun at the end. The streets of Belfast, it transpires, do demand attention from the narrator, like the continuing cost of servicing a debt. The two final lines, echoing each other, are like the echoes of the back streets continuing in his mind long after he has left the place.

"The Spring Vacation", which is the title Mahon next arrived at for this poem, indicates that he can only accept his origins across an interval, in this case the interval between leaving Belfast and coming back for a holiday. And the last metaphor of financial interest can join him imaginatively to his origins only after he has denied all of the previous metaphors. Mahon's people occupy a zone in which he can feel imaginatively but not morally at ease and beyond which the world of reason lies.

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Derek Mahon has compared the poets writing in the north of Ireland to the Fugitives in the American South — Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others. These poets interest him, he says, not only because of their formalism, "but because they created a curious little focus of poetry in a place that was generally disliked, rightly disliked, in the States". There, a "morally ambiguous situation" gave rise to "tremendous poetry".¹³ This picture, of the poet surrounded by yet cut off from his people who are in turn surrounded by a larger body of opinion which dislikes them for the same reasons as the poet does, elucidates the ambiguity of Mahon's work. But if the reasons for the poet's and wider public's dislike of the poet's community are the same the nature of the disliking is not. For the poet still professes an imaginative loyalty to his origins.

To separate and to concede some join, or to propose a join only to separate again, these are the central movements of Mahon's thought. The interval between "I" and "we" around which "The Spring Vacation" revolves, runs through the poems. People and poet, group history and individual history, are allowed to be joined for a brief moment before the poem dissolves the union. The image of a snowflake dissolving into water, "a light snowflake laid/ In a dark river at night", which recurs in the poems, sums up these self-deprecating artefacts about to disintegrate into history and the chaos

13. "Harriet Cooke talks to Derek Mahon", *Irish Times*, 17 January 1973, p. 10.

of the world outside.¹⁴

The short poem "Nostalgias" is a good illustration of a briefly conceded resemblance between speaker and people. Here the objects referred to experience a falling away from a state of grace and yet, being objects, they put a necessary distance between the narrator and his people. Indeed, the self-critical anthropomorphism which runs through many of the poems can be read as an extension of the impulse to belong and the concomitant wish to draw back from belonging.¹⁵

The chair squeaks in a high wind,
Rain falls from its branches,
The kettle yearns for the
Mountain, the soap for the sea.
In a tiny stone church
On the desolate headland
A lost tribe is singing 'Abide With Me'.

The objects' yearning to return to their origins seems at first contrary to all human construction, like the narrator's people wanting to join their God. But does the narrator not want to join his people also? The words "yearns", "tiny", "desolate", and "lost" indicate that this is so. This is a poem of regret which proposes discontinuity, says there is no going back, but does go back all the same. By dwelling on the regret, it mimics and thus partly abolishes the interval between poet and people.

"Nostalgias" holds the terms of poet and people together in a volatile state. The version just quoted from *Poems 1962-1978* (1979) appears in altered form in the *Selected Poems* (1991). The most significant change is in the second-last line where "The desolate headland" becomes "a desolate headland". The definite article was perhaps too directly referential to a particular place and a people.

Let us turn to Mahon's most praised and perhaps best known poem, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford".¹⁶ Here the detachment of the narrator from the objects, some mushrooms in a shed, is, as it was in "Nostalgias", belied by the use of a vocabulary of the emotions. The mushrooms are introduced after the evocation of other places and objects united by an endless falling away from happiness:

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

14. See "The Studio", "The Snow Party", "The Terminal Bar", and "Craigvara House", in *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991).
15. See for instance, "The Studio", "A Kind of People", "Rocks", "Lives", "Deaths", "The Mayo Tao", in *Poems 1962-1978*.
16. Version in *Poems 1962-1978*.

Of wildflowers in the lift-shaft,
 Indian compounds where the wind dances
 And a door bangs with diminished confidence ...

Even now, in what is for the narrator a fallen world, there are places where other fallings can be imagined. If he is alienated from some kind of happiness so too are the objects. In the Indian compound the wind dances, no Indians do, and even the door's confidence is diminished. Human desolation is displaced on to the objects. Human and inanimate are joined as the eye of the narrator now zooms in on the mushrooms while they focus on a keyhole, looking out:

Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel,
 Among the bathtubs and 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?

An interval intrudes which resembles that existing between narrator and objects. Who are these mushrooms anyway? A hint is given by the exploited Peruvian mines and the "diminished confidence" of the Indian compound:

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.

The memory of the man who took an interest in them lingers on (his departure is "interminable") and yet they know it is useless to hope ("he never came back"). As the thought of the poem grows there is a falling-away in these creatures' desire. In the second stanza the narrator asks, "what should they do but desire?" but in the fourth they "have been so long/ Expectant that there is only the posture". After the civil war when the state took away the mycologist's property he moved elsewhere and those who were ruled and understood by him are still waiting. At the end they exact more than the narrator's casual pity: "'Save us, save us', they seem to say (...) 'You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,/ Let not our naive labours have been in vain' ". Mahon's people, the Protestants abandoned by the British, find their alienation from what they desire expressed in the disconsolate narrator's alienation from his own people, and in the division between the "us" of himself as detached observer and the "them" of the mushrooms. Just as the mushrooms cannot be reduced

to the Protestants of Northern Ireland (and vice versa) the speaker cannot be reduced to Mahon. The poem insists that the speaker's view of the world mimics but can never be identical to the mushrooms' sense of betrayal, loss, and waste. The endless fallings away which feature in the poem all differ from each other. Within the poem itself Mahon pulls back from creating stable metaphors and instead presents us with dissolving analogies. The two domains from which the terms of speaker and people are taken and to which they are returned are vast and mysterious.¹⁷ This is undoubtedly why the poem became one of Mahon's best known and most admired achievements.

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Another approach to the vexed issue of self and people can be seen in Mahon's translations (see Tinley below, pp. 80-95). In poems such as "A Disused Shed" and "Nostalgias" an interval between self and people is established within the poem which allows space for a tremendously suggestive and lingering regret. A reading of the poem "Anteros" — a translation of a poem by the late-Romantic French poet Gérard de Nerval — shows that this interval can be provided by another text. While the act of translation can distance Mahon from the moral ambiguity he presents, it also marks the insertion-point of a classic (Nerval's poem) into an actual historical moment (another poet's attempt to represent the troubled state of Northern Ireland).

Why did Mahon choose to translate Nerval? Perhaps because in his *Chimères* Nerval presents a speaker without a people — a disinherited persona standing outside time and drawing on multiple layers of myth.¹⁸ But it is significant that Mahon adds to Nerval and we note that he is not as disinherited as the poet he translates. This can be seen in two places in "Anteros" where the translation departs significantly from the original.

"Anteros" can be read as an allegorical version of "The Spring Vacation" but it is a version which lacks even the comfort of feeling imaginatively at ease. The divided mind is at war with itself. Nerval's speaker, Antéros is full of the perverse pride of the fallen angels. Against his addressee, who is on the side of God, Hercules or Cadmus (for Nerval conflates Greek and Old Testament stories), Antéros is pitched in outright war. The first difference between the two poems lies in the treatment of the figures of Cain and Abel. Nerval's defeated giant Antéros speaks of the pallor of Abel and of the redness of Cain

17. For a terminology of metaphor see J. David Sapir, "The Anatomy of Metaphor", in *The Social Use of Metaphor*, ed. J. David Sapir and J. Christopher Crocker (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

18. Derek Mahon, *The Chimeras* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1982). Gérard de Nerval, *Oeuvres*, ed. Albert Béguin and Jean Richer (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 4-5.

in a proverbial way (as one would speak of the wisdom of Solomon for example). He possesses within himself the attributes of both Cain and Abel: he is marked on the forehead like Cain and under his white victim's face feels the anger of the murderer:

Oui, je suis de ceux-là qu'inspire le Vengeur,
Il m'a marqué le front de sa lèvre irritée,
Sous la pâleur d'Abel, hélas! ensanglantée,
J'ai parfois de Caïn l'implacable rougeur!

Mahon's speaker is not one person who occasionally shares the attributes of Cain or of Abel but two related people, as his introduction of the word "brother" indicates:

Yes, I am one of those revenge inspires
That kissed my forehead with its ulcerous mouth.
I've felt the furious flush of Cain beneath
My murdered brother's blood-commingled tears.

The other difference in the versions is that Mahon completely adds to the victory of the "conquering god" the idea of expropriation, the seizure of land or assets by the state. Nerval's Antéros ends with a vow to continue the fight of the old gods (his ancestors) against the new god (Jehovah):

Et protégeant tout seul ma mère Amalécite,
Je ressème à ses pieds les dents du vieux dragon.

Mahon's Anteros adds to the source text the idea of revenge, and his Anteros concludes with a threat:

Sole tutelary, the dragon-teeth I sow
Before my expropriated mother's feet.

We have seen how Mahon has already used the word "expropriated" in this curious way, to describe a person, in "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" where the "expropriated mycologist" was a landowner who left Ireland after the civil war in the 'twenties. Nerval's speaker ends with the intention of protecting his widowed mother and of taking on the power of sowing discord, or dragon's teeth. Mahon's version, with the addition of the idea of expropriation, draws out from the expression "dragon teeth" its meaning of civil war. Because in Mahon's "Anteros" the speaker splits into two, each side possessing qualities of Cain and Abel, it is impossible to say who did the expropriating of the speaker's mother. The mythology in Mahon's poem is deliberately unclear and in its internalisation and splitting of the Cain and Abel

story it blurs the polar opposites of Nerval's. Nerval takes pleasure in reversing Cain and Abel's roles and in siding with the devil's party. But for Mahon, both gods and fallen angels, as well as Abel and Cain, are part of each other and a part of the speaker himself.

Using Nerval's poem gives Mahon a certain freedom. Within the space created by the act of translation he can dramatise the self-destructive mythology of civil war, just touched on in "The Spring Vacation", and allow himself to add the weight of referential detail. However "Anteros" remains an experimental piece. It lacks the suggestive power of "Spring Vacation" and other poems because the allegorical depiction of civil war excludes the lingering feeling of regret about belonging to one's own.

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Mahon's exile from his people is voluntarily and conditionally undone each time he writes of them. Within the poems about belonging he creates an interval between poet and people from which he can hold forth. It is from this position within the interval that the speaker of a poem called "Rage for Order" draws attention to himself:

Now watch me as I make history. Watch as I tear down
To build up with a desperate love.

These two lines could serve as a useful point of entry to all of the poems about belonging. But it is the poem "Courtyards in Delft" which pushes belonging and not belonging to their most extraordinary limits.

In "Courtyards in Delft" the world of a seventeenth-century painting by Pieter de Hooch (see cover) works as part of the distancing strategy. The painting provides the other term, in the same way as Nerval's text does in "Anteros", or as the mushrooms do in "A Disused Shed". "Courtyards" begins with an ahistorical appreciation of two kinds of art: the quiet, ordered, bourgeois world of Dutch painting is contrasted with Hogarth prints and other seventeenth-century paintings on human vanity. Why is it that the solid predictability of the Dutch world seems to dissatisfy and even irritate the impersonal voice of the art critic?

That girl with her back to us who waits
For her man to come home for his tea
Will wait till the paint disintegrates
And ruined dykes admit the esurient sea;
Yet this is life too, and the cracked
Out-house door a verifiable fact
As vividly mnemonic as the sunlit
Railings that front the houses opposite.

With a jolt the words "vividly mnemonic" push beyond the tone of the art lecture to someone talking as an autobiographical "I". In what is by now a familiar movement, the interval between artist and autobiographical self, between poet and people is allowed to narrow dramatically as the world of the Dutch painting becomes the world of the speaker's childhood.

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 war
 On parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse ...

The painting, which had been presented as an artefact outside history, now catapults us into the speaker's past while simultaneously moving into the future of the Dutch people whose world it portrays: to the vortrekkers in South Africa and to the Orangemen in Northern Ireland ("parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse"). Mahon's position of belonging in an imaginative way to something which his reason repudiates is captured in the time interval in his own life and in the vivid persistence of the painting. But at the time he was growing up among his own the boy was displaced and had to lie low in the over-ordered world where everything knows its place.

The "coal/ Glittering in its shed" finds an echo in another poem linking Northern Ireland and South Africa. The first version of "North Wind: Portrush" had as its epigraph a quotation from the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer: "If I had gone to live elsewhere in the world, I should never have known that this particular morning ... continues, will always continue to exist."¹⁹ The Gordimer quotation is a miniature version of what Mahon does in "Courtyards". There is a conditional admittance of the familiar — the corrupt society he has grown up in is beautiful because it is home, but it can only be expressed after an interval has been established. Here the conditional expression, "if I had gone to live elsewhere", lingers on infinitely with the interval. The place will "always continue to exist".

It is at this point of rest where the thought of the other poems, "Spring Vacation", "Nostalgias", and "A Disused Shed", had been permitted to stop. Indeed, the first version of "Courtyards" had ended here. But in a later collection of poems Mahon added a final explicit

19. Version in *Courtyards in Delft* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981), quoted from Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*. The epigraph is dropped in later versions, perhaps because it too explicitly connects Northern Ireland with South Africa.

stanza.²⁰ The reason why the strange child 'must' be lying low, in both the painting and in the place of his childhood, is now given. This new stanza begins with the explanatory conjunction "for":

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 interval between the beauty of the painting and the historical moment it was part of had found its correlative in the interval between the speaker and his people. But now, the civilisation of Delft is itself depicted as a chaotic sea, creeping over a map of the world which hangs on a wall in the painting. Order reverses into chaos as the potential of history in the making (the not yet accurate linen map) is presented with despairing hindsight. With the expression "if only" the speaker wishes for pagan Maenads, female votaries of Dionysus, to destroy the puritanical force of expansion which punishes nature in the name of God, and he simultaneously abandons the autobiographical "I" to take on the moralist's "we".

This final stanza catches the speaker's thought on the turn and moves on from the initial position where ease of imaginative belonging was counterbalanced by moral unease. Legitimately the speaker deplores the damage which his Christian civilisation has committed, and continues to commit, and wishes that Pagan Maenads had gone around smashing delft at an earlier stage of western European history. But why? So that we now might sleep easier in our beds at night. There is something deliberately flat, almost anticlimatic, about this ending. This "we", where the speaker concludes by being morally among his own, can be compared to the "we" briefly assumed in "Spring Vacation". In this case art can only declare its limitations in the face of the pressure of events. In the other poems about belonging the poems' own chronologies, or their sense, are played against the world to which they refer. Chronology and the world outside echo and mimic each other.²¹ But in "Courtyards in Delft" the world referred to (the world of Delft seen as home) threatens to engulf the poem's own chronology altogether.

20. Compare the first version in *Courtyards in Delft* with the later version in *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and again with the version in *Selected Poems*. (See Denman above, pp. 27-37.)

21. See Leonard Linsky, *Referring* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Humanities Press, 1967).

"Courtyards in Delft" works the topos of belonging and not belonging to its highest pitch. Not once, but twice, the scope of the construct is extended outwards to include the chaos of history, firstly autobiographical history, and then European and world history, and back ironically to a synthesis of the two. The final stanza, where the speaker for a second time allows himself to obtrude and refer, proves to be highly volatile. Absent in the collection *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), it appears in *The Hunt by Night* (1982), only to disappear again in *Selected Poems* (1991). The text itself, and not just the voices speaking from within the intervals it creates, is sandwiched between light and shade, between a desire to belong to a people, and blackest despair at what belonging can lead one people to do to another.