



Trinity College Dublin

The University of Dublin

DEREK MAHON

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The poet Derek Mahon read English, French and Philosophy as an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin between 1960 and 1965. He was not a conscientious student. His time at the college was interrupted due to academic ill-discipline, with periods spent away in London and Paris, which stretched 'a typical four-year course to five' (Ennis 2014, 46, 56, 63). As he has admitted of his years at university: 'Work? I hardly did a hand's turn' (Mahon 2012, 238). Yet Mahon might be viewed as a Trinity writer in ways that extend beyond his studies (or lack thereof) at the college. He found there an environment that nourished his literary talents and memories of undergraduate life have more recently offered him an emotional anchor to return to amid a peripatetic literary career.

Mahon was born in Belfast on 23 November 1941. His parents had jobs in the city's two big industries of the time. His father worked at the Harland and Wolff shipyard, and rose to be an inspector of engines; his mother, before marrying, worked at the York Street Flax Spinning Company. Protestant working-class rising to lower middle, they lived in North Belfast, his mother 'house-proud', the family anxious 'about being seen to do the right thing' and going to church while not being 'serious church people'. At St Peter's, on the nearby Antrim Road, Mahon became an accomplished choirboy, gaining an early 'belief in the words and the tunes', if not quite in the deity they praised (Grennan 2000, 155–6).

Alongside such comfort and respectability, the poet's work evokes a portrait of himself as an only child in a quiet house, dwelling on the objects around him – 'The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon' ('Courtyards in Delft') – and uneasily staring out at the world 'visible from' his 'window' ('Autobiographies'). He also grew up in a city marked by war and increasingly shadowed by the waning of industry and empire. Belfast in the spring of 1941, just before he was born, had been subject to a series of devastating air raids, in which tens of thousands of homes were damaged and destroyed; by the 1960s the linen and shipbuilding industries were clearly in decline. Mahon's work has often sought to reckon with the alienation that individual isolation, alongside the derelictions of history, brings to bear on any too secure notion of identity, inheritance, community or place. In *The Home Front* section of 'Autobiographies', he tellingly depicts himself playing 'hide-and-seek / Among the air-raid shelters [...] A male child in a garden / Clutching the *Empire News*'.

From the age of eleven, Mahon attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution ('Inst'), a large and prestigious city-centre grammar school. For all its 'boys who played rugby and fought' (Ennis 2014, 23), it also had a more liberal side, giving Mahon the chance to visit France, act in school plays and participate in debating and literary societies. While studying there, he was already writing 'amazingly accomplished verse' (Longley 1994, 51) and becoming increasingly aware of contemporary poetry: the 'illustrious' T.S. Eliot, Robert Graves and Dylan Thomas; the 'locals' Louis MacNeice, W.R. Rodgers and John Hewitt; and the 'New English' Philip Larkin and Donald Davie. In his final year an inspiring teacher, John Boyle, also introduced him to the work of W.B. Yeats, including 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'a sublime gift from the gods far transcending contemporary poetry – except for pop songs of course'. In the process, the schoolboy poet became drawn to 'a magically recent world [...] the streets of Dublin, a hundred miles down the road' (Mahon 2012, 65).

On arriving in Dublin to attend Trinity, Mahon threw himself into college literary life. He received inspiration and encouragement from some of his lecturers including Alec Reid, Con Leventhal, and Owen Sheehy Skeffington and, for all his lack of work, 'quite a lot of reading got done' (Mahon 2012, 238). More important than any formal education was the camaraderie of the other aspiring writers he met, including Brendan Kennelly, Rudi Holzapfel, Deborah de Vere White, Jeremy Lewis, Louis Asekoff, Ronnie Whalen, Eavan Boland, Edna Broderick and (Broderick's future husband) Michael Longley. Longley, down from Belfast and 'Inst' two years earlier, has evocatively recalled the pair in their college rooms communally inhaling with their 'untipped Sweet Afton cigarettes MacNeice, Crane, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Larkin, Lawrence, Graves, Ted Hughes, Stevens, Cummings, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, as well as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Brecht, Rilke' (Longley 1994, 53). Theirs has proved to be a particularly close and enabling friendship, with 'the exchange of poems, gossip, criticism, and jokes' (Haughton 2007, 24) continuing ever since.

Mahon's first appearance in print as a student came at the end of his first term in *Icarus*, Trinity's (still thriving) literary magazine: 'the voice of a community that knew how to waste time and think about the important things' (Mahon 2012, 243). He was to prove both prolific and precocious during his years at university, publishing over forty poems and gaining recognition outside the college's walls by having poems printed in *The Irish Times* and winning a prestigious Eric Gregory Award in 1965 (Philip Larkin chaired the selection committee that year). Though much of this work was 'of erratic quality and style' (Haughton 2007, 32), several poems from this period remain highly admired: 'Spring in Belfast' (in earlier versions and printings titled 'In Belfast', 'Poem in Belfast' and 'The Spring Vacation'), 'Glengormley' (previously 'Suburban Walk'), 'Carrowdore' (previously 'In Carrowdore Churchyard'), 'Bird Sanctuary', 'De Quincey at Grasmere' (previously 'De Quincey in Later Life') and 'Breton Walks' (earlier 'Spring Notes in Brittany' and 'Walks in the Countryside around St Brieuc'). With some justification, Longley has

hailed Mahon's juvenilia, much of which still remains uncollected, as being as 'assured as early Auden', 'matched in English only' by some extraordinarily accomplished early poems of Keith Douglas and Geoffrey Hill (Longley 1994, 52). It is certainly hard to gainsay such sentiments in the face of a poem such as 'An Unborn Child', first published in *Icarus* in December 1962. A monologue spoken from within the womb, it blends premonitions of freedom and constriction into an arresting new vision with great wit and no little sense of terror:

I have already come to the verge of
Departure. A month or so and
I shall be vacating this familiar room.
Its fabric fits me almost like a glove
While leaving latitude for a free hand.
I begin to put on the manners of the world,
Sensing the splitting light above
My head, where in the silence I lie curled.

For all their literary achievements, Mahon's student years were not without their own personal travails, as Stephen Ennis's biography of the poet makes clear. Yet Mahon has also described the process of leaving Trinity, 'which had become, for many of us, a home from home', as 'traumatic' (Mahon 2012, 240). The years that followed were certainly unsettled. The September after sitting his final exams, Mahon travelled to Canada to study and teach at the University of Western Ontario, but only stayed a term. He then entered the US 'without doing the proper paperwork' to spend 'an uneasy and neurotic year imposing on friends and taking short-term jobs in a photo shop, a book depository and a boys' boarding school' (Mahon 2014, 23) in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts. Going back to Canada, he worked in Toronto for several months, including as a night switchboard operator

at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, before returning to Belfast in the spring of 1967.

His first full collection appeared from Oxford University Press in 1968 under a title fittingly suggestive of darkness and transience, *Night-Crossing*. It received the boost in the UK of being a Poetry Book Society Choice and was warmly received by many critics on both sides of the Irish Sea. With considerable technical facility, the volume sets in train some of the major themes and modes pursued across Mahon's oeuvre. Against the impossibility of truly being at home 'among' one's 'own' ('Spring in Belfast') are set the risks of various more displaced and searching forms of exiled living, whether arrived at through the troubling pursuit of art—and Mahon is a highly allusive poet, much given to the poem 'after' other artworks and artists, whether as translation, ekphrastic encounter or ventriloquising monologue—or in the aftermath of overt kinds of transgression. There is an implicit link made in several of the poems between the artist and the pariah, creation and guilt seemingly being closely aligned. This is crystallised in 'The Forger', about the notorious Dutch painter and seller of fake Vermeers to Hermann Goering, Han van Meegeren:

And I, too, have suffered
Obscurity and derision,
And sheltered in my heart of hearts
A light to transform the world.

Art too might be just another egotistical original sin, leaving one 'alone far out at sea' ('Day Trip to Donegal').

For all the remarkable qualities of his early poems, Mahon has since expressed dissatisfaction with his 'horrible, scatterbrained first book' (Mahon 2014, 31). Part of his later unease with its contents might be the manner in which history subsequently unfolded, as Northern Ireland was soon enveloped by the horrors of

the Troubles. Certainly a poem from the volume such as 'Glengormley' ('Only words hurt us now') seems to chime with Mahon's comment (as reported by Eavan Boland in her series of articles for *The Irish Times* in 1970 on 'The Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience') that: 'I really thought all this was the nightmare of history from which I was one of the lucky generation that had finally recovered'. He is one of an extraordinary number of accomplished poets who emerged from Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, including Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, James Simmons, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian and Frank Ormsby, whose work had to respond to and come to maturity amid the considerable pressures of ongoing political and sectarian violence. Like many of those contemporaries, however, Mahon's engagement was to be characterised by indirection and obliquity, as he sought to evade the pitfalls of direct reportage or opinionated commentary within a public sphere saturated by media coverage and demagogic community spokespeople. It would also be a situation that Mahon would observe from a distance, as he moved first to Dublin and then, in 1970, to London, where he started a family and spent most of the next fifteen years, making a living precariously as a freelance literary journalist.

The title poem of his next volume, *Lives* (1972), is representative of an approach pursued by Mahon in several poems of the period, and by many other Northern Irish poets concurrently and since, in offering a kind of displaced or long view on the processes of conflict and history. A lyric 'I' narrates a series of dizzying material, temporal, and geographical transformations. Beginning as 'a torc of gold' dug up in Ireland in 1854—replaying an anecdote in Seán O'Faoláin's mid-century work of national characterisation, *The Irish* (1947)—this voice then recounts 'once' being an oar 'stuck in the shore' marking an ancient grave (echoing Homer and Xenophon), before becoming a 'bump of clay / In a Navaho rug'. On arriving in the present the speaker has become an anthropologist who warns those following him who might think to have 'once been me' to revise their 'insolent ontology'. Starting out within an archaeological enterprise seemingly invested in finding identity

through recovering a sense of historical continuity derived from the artefacts of the past, the poem moves towards an insistence on cultural and historical difference, finally articulated at the existential level of the self's being. In contrast to some of his peers—most notably Seamus Heaney, who ambiguously becomes a dedicatee of later printings of this poem—Mahon does not meditate upon the other in place or time in a search of recognition or understanding; rather he highlights the appropriative hazards of doing so. In relation to the title of the poem and the volume as a whole, this at first seemingly abstruse argument resonates with a present situation in which people's 'lives' have literally been lost due to the willingness of many to speak on behalf of others and to pursue their 'insolent ontology' to the point of murder.

The self-lacerating self-consciousness of much of his work, however, is often articulated through an elegant, witty and unashamedly literary voice. 'Even now', in the aftermath of so much destruction, Mahon's imagination 'finds there are places where a thought might grow', to quote the opening line of his single most celebrated poem, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', which closed what is probably his most highly regarded collection, *The Snow Party* (1975). Out of an unpropitious scenario – a growth of mushrooms in a long abandoned shed – this poem fashions a series of daring anthropomorphic contemplations. In its mixture of imaginative pathos and bathetic over-identification (the comparison between these mushrooms and the 'Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii'), performed with a considerable degree of formal accomplishment in large carefully orchestrated end-stopped stanzas, the poem faces up to the double-edged reality, as Douglas Dunn describes, of 'everything' being both 'worthy of consideration' and yet 'susceptible' to being changed into an idea (Dunn 1980). Beauty and thought are not eclipsed or rendered irrelevant by a benighted history in Mahon's poetry; the imagination and the aesthetic, by turns disconcertingly and joyfully, survive.

The end of the 1970s saw the publication of the selected volume *Poems 1962–1978* (1979). Any sense of the presentation there of what was by now an impressive body

of work was somewhat complicated by the book's revelation of Mahon's propensity for revision. As well as altering titles and cutting whole sections of poems, Mahon also changed poems' dedications, form, layout, particular words and phrases and excluded many poems entirely from his subsequent selected and collected volumes. Whatever the merits of Mahon's extensive revisions – and they have been the cause of some critical lamentation – such textual instability certainly presents a challenge to students of his poetry. Other aspects of his work that emerged more strongly around this time included his commitment to translation, starting with the publication of Gérard de Nerval's sonnet sequence *Les Chimères* (*The Chimeras*, 1982), and continuing through to the present, as evidenced by the many pieces recently collected in *Echo's Grove* (2013). Several of these translations and adaptations have been of verse plays, recently collected in *Theatre* (2013). Mahon even built something of a career for himself as a television screenwriter in the 1980s, adapting fiction by Elizabeth Bowen and Jennifer Johnston, among others.

Following on from the two original volumes *The Hunt by Night* (1982) and *Antarctica* (1985), though, was a period of relative poetic inactivity. Battles with alcoholism and the breakdown of his marriage seemed to take their toll as Mahon moved first to Ireland, where he worked briefly at Trinity as the college's first Writer Fellow, and then, in 1990, to New York. His next full collection, *The Hudson Letter*, did not appear until 1995. Its long epistolary title poem reflects on his four years in New York and is a significant shift into an overtly autobiographical mode, pursued through a more discursive and formally loose style. On moving to Dublin, a similar treatment of that city takes place in the book-length sequence *The Yellow Book* (1997). Both poems are highly allusive, even by Mahon's standards: New York is experienced as a tissue of literary quotations, from Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Ginsberg, W.H. Auden and others; Dublin is examined through the Decadent literary movement of the previous *fin de siècle*. Such range of reference serves to pit the values of culture and conscience against both cities' increasing domination by an inhumane capitalism and consumerism.

This change in approach, while pleasing some commentators, drew considerable criticism from others who had previously applauded Mahon's formal control and political reticence. However, his return to a lyric style somewhat closer to his earlier work, in the collections *Harbour Lights* (2005), *Life on Earth* (2008), and *An Autumn Wind* (2010), held onto these longer poems' personal frankness and outspokenness about a range of modernity's discontents, including a growing concern for the ecological. These more recent poems do so in a voice that is now not so much loose as light, playfully open to the moment when 'the still living whole' might just 'heal the heart and cure the soul' ('New Space'). There is also something winningly spritely about the improvised observations and recollections of Mahon's recent departure into a more self-reflexive prose style in *Selected Prose* (2012) and *Red Sails* (2014). 'We're not prisoners but visitors in our time' (Mahon 2014, 95), he muses as through vignettes of memoir or travel writing these essays open up to the possibility that the world is as much an opportunity as an imposition.

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