

Nothing is ever 'done': Derek Mahon and textual instability

leaving us, since you never *could* 'do hands',
your unfinished self-portrait just as it stands,
'more sketch than picture' (nothing is ever 'done').

"The Hudson Letter", XVII, 41-43

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One of a new generation of poets that emerged from Northern Ireland in the early 1960s, Derek Mahon quickly established his poetic credentials with three powerful collections, *Night-Crossing* (1968), *Lives* (1972) and *The Snow Party* (1975), and at the age of 38, brought out a first selection of his poetry entitled *Poems 1962-1978* (1979). In a kind of introduction to this work,¹ published independently, Mahon described it as "a sort of 'selected collected' edition" of his poetry to date, its total 88 poems comprising 67 chosen from his earlier collections plus 21 more recent poems, some making their début in print. The selection of work was uncontroversial, only 8 poems from the collections being excluded, but what dismayed fans and critics alike were the changes he had made to several of the poems.² Revising work that had appeared only in some provisional printed form, such as a pamphlet or magazine, was unexceptionable, but making changes to poems that had been published in a collection (in fact, *The Snow Party* may still have been in print) was another thing altogether. It was equivalent to a painter surreptitiously touching up a work that had been hanging in an art museum for many years, a feat Pierre Bonnard is said to have performed at the Musée Luxembourg.³

Poems 1962-1978 itself carried neither preface nor foreword. There was only a brief statement on the flap of its dust jacket (“Some of the poems have been revised, one or two extensively, and some given new titles”) to prepare the reader for some surprising changes within. Since that time, Mahon has continued to exercise the right to revise his poems whenever they have reappeared in published form. This study examines these changes and seeks a possible justification for them.

What soon becomes apparent on collating *Poems* with *NC*, *L* and *TSP*, the volumes that furnish most of its contents, is that the revisions affect a greater number of his poems and are more extensive than its dust-jacket warning might lead us to expect. 24 poems of *NC*'s total of 28, 23⁴ of *L*'s 26 and 23⁵ of *TSP*'s 24 poems are reprinted in *Poems*. Of these, not a single poem from *NC* escapes some form of revision, while only one poem from *L* and six from *TSP* avoid change. If relatively minor changes to punctuation are ignored, these figures become three, four and ten, respectively, but this still amounts to only seventeen unchanged poems. Some poems are reprinted in something close to their original form except for a title change. More often retitling is only one of many changes. Yet given the importance of titles for identifying poems, it is alarming to note just how many poems undergo a title change: ten from *NC*, eight from *L* and eight poems from *TSP*.⁶ In four poems from the latter group, the new title is the result of a regrouping: “Dead of Night”, renamed “Málaga” in *Poems*, is paired with a new poem “Patmos” under the new title “Postcards”; “The Gipsies” is subsumed into the new “Three Poems after Jaccottet”; “Flying” is similarly admitted to “Light Music”; while, with the break-up of the five-poem suite “Cavafy”, its sole surviving poem, “The Facts of Life”, is listed in *Poems* under its own title. This can be all very confusing for the reader and *Poems*' index of first lines (neither *Selected Poems* nor *Collected Poems* supplies one) proves

indispensable for tracking down such poems.

If title changes impinge on the identity of poems, so too does the alteration of their texts. Ninety percent of the poems transferred into *Poems* from the earlier collections undergo revisions of some kind, though fortunately in most cases these are relatively minor. At their simplest, they involve only the addition / removal of dedications and epigraphs or of hyphens and brackets, or the replacement of semi-colons by commas, or dashes by full stops or the reverse of these, for apart from the insertion of inverted commas around quotations, there is no consistent pattern of change in punctuation. Verbal changes affect many poems, though, for most, they involve only a few words or the rewriting / addition of one or two lines. Fifteen poems from *NC*, five from *L* and four poems from *TSP* undergo changes of this order. In other poems, such as "Breton Walks" (originally titled "Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc" in *NC*) and *L*'s "Consolations of Philosophy", the rewriting extends to three or four lines, while *NC*'s "Day Trip to Donegal" loses a six-line stanza. However, in none of these cases can the revision be seen as extensive.

Adjustments to line length and stanza form and other kinds of structural alteration figure prominently among the revisions in *Poems* and, as argued by Michael Allen in "Rhythm and Revision in Mahon's Poetic Development",⁷ relate to Mahon's rhythmical reformulation of his work in the 1970s and beyond. *NC* is the volume least affected by structural changes, though the recasting of the long-lined, three-line stanzas of "April on Toronto Island" into compact six-liners typifies the way adjustments to line-length (in this case, by shortening them) and the eradication of unstressed line-endings make for a tougher, more decisive tone. Similar adjustments can be seen in "Homecoming", "Lives", "An Image from Beckett", "Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy" (formerly "After Cavafy") and "Entropy", all from *L*. In

"Entropy", Mahon lengthens the line by a series of transfers of part-lines, totally dismantles its three-line stanzas and, with the aid of massive cuts, compresses the poem into an undivided 31-line unit, which echoes the form of "Gipsies" on the adjacent page. In "Rage for Order", *L*'s shorter, more hesitant lines arranged in six-line stanzas give way to expansive free verse in jagged units of different length. "Matthew V. 29-30" (from *TSP*) undergoes a similar change from three-line stanzas to irregular units of free verse, which by regularly closing on the refrain "the offence continued", underscore the futility of his speaker's self-amputations. "The Apotheosis of Tins" and "The Mayo Tao" (formerly "A Hermit") were both prose poems in *TSP*. In *Poems*, they reappear as free verse, divided into irregular units. Finally, "Málaga" (formerly "Dead of Night"), its long lines barely distinguishable from prose in *TSP*, reappears as a compact, short-lined poem similar in form to "Patmos", its partner poem in a new duo entitled "Postcards".

Fourteen poems are structurally modified and, taking into account the presence of major verbal changes, three of these, "April on Toronto Island", "Entropy" and "An Image from Beckett",⁸ may be considered extensively revised. Two other poems, "My Wicked Uncle" and "The Condensed Shorter Testament", not affected by structural changes but massively transformed by cuts and / or rewriting, may be added to the list. This gives a total of five extensively revised poems, a figure more realistic than that proposed on *Poems*' cover flap and one that almost certainly errs on the modest side.⁹

From this survey of the revisions made to poems on their re-publication in *Poems 1962-1978*, significant tendencies emerge. Several of Mahon's poems make their first printed appearance in a periodical, magazine or pamphlet, and this early version is frequently revised on its transfer into a major collection. At this stage, the revision is usually light — the substitution

of a word or two or changes to punctuation — but, in exceptional cases, the poem may be given an extensive overhaul.¹⁰ This does not spare the work from being revised once again for *Poems*. Mahon's heaviest revisions tend to be made on a poem's entry into a selected / collected edition, of which there have been four to date: *Poems 1962-1978* (1979), *Selected Poems* (1990), *Collected Poems* (1999), and *Selected Poems* (2000).¹¹ As seen above, the revisions in the first of these are not restricted to poems making their first appearance in collected form but also impinge on "established poems" often many years after their publication début and irrespective of whether the collection that first housed them was still in print. The incidence and scale of revision increase proportionally with distance in time. Thus, more poems from *NC* than from the two later collections are revised in *Poems* and the revisions to them tend to be heavier. "April on Toronto Island", as one example, is so transformed by rewriting as to be scarcely recognizable as the same poem. It is also the sole *NC* poem subjected to major restructuring for, in what may be seen as an opposing trend, poems from *L* and *TSP* are more susceptible to structural change. The succession of structural, verbal and title changes that *L*'s poem "What Will Remain" went through as it evolved into *TSP*'s "Thammuz" and then into *Poems*' "The Golden Bough" gives a fascinating early glimpse of revision in progress and of an impulsion (more usually associated with painters than poets) to carry works further. But if revision in Mahon is ongoing, it is not consistently unidirectional. He normally recognizes when he has gone too far and, more easily than a painter, can restore what has been cut or changed. An early example of such a change of heart can be seen in his retitling of *L*'s poem "The Archaeologist". Its new title in *Poems*, "A Stone Age Figure Far Below", is actually not new at all, but the title that graced it on its first appearance in the 1970 pamphlet *Ecclesiastes*.

One of the most controversial tendencies in Mahon's revision, his updating of poems, first attracted critical attention in a 1991 review of his *Selected Poems*.¹² There Edna Longley argued that "the urge to revise, however subtle the shifts of ideology and self-representation, is an urge to rewrite history", citing as examples Mahon's suppression of a politically charged reference to "an Aegean prison" in stanza 13 of *Poems*' version of "Beyond Howth Head" and his excision of the same stanza's closing lines:

and the United States, whose swell
intentions pave the road to hell,
send in the CIA to make
Cambodia safe for Dick Van Dyke.

The verse letter first appeared in pamphlet form in 1970 and was then reprinted with minor revisions in *Lives* (1972). In both texts, familiarity with the main events of the Greek Colonels' regime and the Vietnam War is assumed. However, as glosses on this stanza, Mahon refers to the imprisonment of Mikis Theodorakis and the deposition of Prince Sihanouk in a set of endnotes. *Poems* dispenses with these endnotes and, while leaving the reader to cope with a number of more remote allusions, rather oddly cuts references to events that were topical a mere seven years before. An explanation is to be found not in any loss of freshness with the passage of time, but in the recentness of their topicality. Tied so intimately to the period of its composition, they 'date' the letter. And though Longley maintains that "verse-epistles *ought* to become dated", Mahon's suppression of such telltale references, here and in later poems, articulates a desire to free his work from its historical location and re-anchor it in the present.

Between *Poems* and the publication of *Selected Poems* (1990), academic interest in his poetry grew exponentially. Papers, typically adopting a grand perspective (urbane, humane, classical, international, even theoptic), familiarized his work to a scholarly audience. At the same time, the conflicting policies they adopted when quoting from his poems raised difficult questions about authorial intention and textual authority. Agonized debates opened up in footnotes, but there was no general agreement as to which readings were to be preferred. Some scholars turned to *Poems* exclusively for all quotations. Others did the same, but where a reading departed from an earlier one in the collections dutifully recorded the fact. Some, unhappy with Mahon's revisions, quoted exclusively from the collections, but where a title had been altered in *Poems*, scrupulously recorded it. Others generally avoided *Poems*, but acknowledged poems that were first collected in its pages. Others still completely sidestepped the problem by not identifying the sources of quotations. This ongoing debate reached a temporary halt with the publication of *Selected Poems*.

Fifty-five of the eighty-eight poems collected in *Poems* made a return in some form in *Selected Poems*. This figure breaks down to thirteen poems from *NC*, sixteen from *L*, ten from *TSP*, and sixteen poems from recent work first collected in *Poems*. This leaves *TSP*, which some still regard as Mahon's finest,¹³ in the invidious position of being the most poorly represented of the earlier collections. Thus, slightly more than half of *Selected*'s total 102 poems are drawn from the sixteen years' work up to 1979. The remaining 47 items belong to the next ten years, and comprise two poems ("Old Roscoff" and "Songs of Praise"), not collected elsewhere, from the pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), all thirty poems from the major collection *The Hunt by Night* (1982), all fourteen from the interim collection *Antarctica* (1985) and one new poem, "Dawn at St. Patrick's".

Given that selection only affects work from *Poems*, while everything published since 1979 is included here in its entirety, the title *Selected Poems* is obviously a misleading one. Part selection and part collection, *Selected* might more accurately be described, as the poet described *Poems*, as another “selected / collected” edition of his work to date. Indeed, the only significant difference between the two works is the greater selectivity exercised in the more recent. Conspicuous among the numerous absences are six poems that underwent major structural revision in *Poems*: “Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy”,¹⁴ “Matthew V. 29-30”, “April on Toronto Island”, “Rage for Order”, “The Mayo Tao” and “The Apotheosis of Tins”. While the first three now drop from the canon completely, the rest will eventually stage a return in *Collected Poems* with most of their pre-*Poems* readings restored and, in the case of “Rage for Order”, a total restoration to its original form. Michael Allen has shown how the poet’s rhythm-related structural adjustments to poems like “Rage for Order” and “Matthew V. 29-30” simplify viewpoint and cut through complexities of nuance to produce radically different poems. Twelve years on, with the publication of *Selected*, the original impulse to recreate these poems had receded into history. Not ready to embark on a fresh set of revisions, Mahon chose to exclude them instead.

As in *Poems*, the first evidence of the reviser’s hand is in the titling. Fifteen poems are re-titled: eleven reprinted from *Poems*, three from *THBN* and one poem from *A*. For five of those from *Poems*, it is their third title: “Van Gogh among the Miners” > “Van Gogh in the Borinage” > “A Portrait of the Artist”; “As God is my Judge” > “Bruce Ismay’s Soliloquy” > “After the Titanic”; “Recalling Arran” > “Thinking of Inishere in Cambridge, Massachusetts” > “Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass.”; “The Gipsies” > “Three Poems after Jaccottet” > “Three Poems by Philippe Jaccottet”; “J. P. Donleavy’s Dublin” > “Dog Days” > “Dream Days”.

Another two poems revert to the titles that had graced them in their first collected state ("De Quincey at Grasmere" > "De Quincey in Later Life"; "Breton Walks" > "Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieuc"). Conversely, "The Return" borrows its new title "Going Home" from a poem of that name that had dropped from the canon after *Poems*.¹⁵ Contrary manifestations of the god-like authority he exercises over the fate of his work, Mahon can relent and restore or summarily abandon a poem (often cannibalizing it first for a useful line or phrase to transfer to another poem).

In the main, poems from *Poems* reproduce their readings in *Selected*, but there are numerous instances of a reversion to an earlier reading.¹⁶ The revision is considerably lighter than in *Poems*, mostly affecting only a few words, but there are several cases where a poem is significantly altered. On the other hand, where there is no change at the verbal level, minor adjustments to punctuation frequently establish new variants. Mahon's most extensive revisions, however, tend to target the later poetry in *Poems*. "Three Poems after Jaccottet", now renamed "Three Poems by Philippe Jaccottet", has its first two poems overhauled, while its third, "The Gipsies" (an independent poem in *TSP* added to the suite in *Poems*),¹⁷ is replaced by a different Jaccottet poem, "Words in the Air". "The Poet in Residence" is retitled "Beyond the Pale", undergoes various verbal changes and loses its thirteenth stanza. More drastically still, the four-poem suite "Surrey Poems" now loses three of its component poems to leave "Midsummer" its sole surviving poem and new title.

In contrast with the heavily revised "Beyond Howth Head", "The Sea in Winter", the poet's second verse letter, came into *Poems* with relatively minor changes. It had been published independently a few months earlier and required only the partial rewriting of two of its stanzas (5 and 12) and the total revamp of stanza 14. On their entry into *Selected*, their fortunes are

reversed. The former undergoes only some ten alterations of word or phrase and a handful of punctuation changes, while the more recent verse letter loses stanzas 5, 10, 18 and 20, acquires two new ones (10 and 17 in the revised order) and contracts in the process to twenty stanzas. The excisions also necessitate a fair amount of rewriting in adjacent stanzas, and what had been an extraordinarily candid account of a personal breakdown in stanza 11 (stanza 9 in the revised order) loses much of its impact as a result. Two of the excised stanzas, 10 and 18, had once provided a time frame for the letter (“When I returned one year ago”/ “And will the year two thousand find / Me still at a window”). Twelve years later, their temporal specificity, like that of the composition details at the close of the poem (“Portstewart — Portrush; Oct., 1977 — Sept., 1978”) and again at the close of “Beyond Howth Head” (“Monkstown, Co. Dublin; March-April 1970 / Lingfield, Surrey; March-April 1975”), was felt to *date* the letter, for none of these time references reappear in *Selected*.

Mahon’s censoring of some of the more colourful words and phrases he had used in earlier poems shows a similar desire to free his work from history. His replacements invariably seem flatter than the originals, as seen in the substitution of “middle-class twits” for “middle-class cunts” (“Afterlives”), of “To scare your pants off” for “To scare you shitless” (“Table Talk”); of “Aroused” and “crazy” for two appearances of “Randy” (“Autobiographies”), and “prim conventual disdain” in place of “tight-arsed, convent-bred disdain” (“Beyond Howth Head”). Asked in a 1991 interview why he had cut the word “cunts” in the phrase from “Afterlives”, Mahon replied that he had discussed the matter with friends who confirmed that it was now “an unacceptable use of the word” and that “good manners” (“if good manners have any place in poetry”) persuaded him to remove it.¹⁸ Reading to ladies’ book-reading societies may have exerted additional

pressure, but in the way that all these changes suppress the idiom of a younger self, they can be seen as a subtle form of updating.¹⁹

Most poems from *THBN* and *A* are reprinted without change or with minor alterations, though certain poems from the former, most radically "The Globe in North Carolina"²⁰ had experienced a first round of revisions in their transit from *CID*. Two otherwise unchanged poems from *THBN* are retitled ("Rathlin Island" > "Rathlin"; "At the Pool" > "Katie at the Pool"). "The Earth" is coupled with the new "White Night" under the new collective title "After Pasternak", while *A*'s "October" is retitled "October in Hyde Park". In poems where the revision is heavier, the addition or dropping of stanzas is the most conspicuous change. "Courtyards in Delft", "Brecht in Svendborg", "Girls on the Bridge", "The Joycentenary Ode" and "A Garage in Co. Cork" (all from *THBN*), and "Songs of Praise" (from *CID*) are the poems chiefly affected. The lopping of stanza five of "Courtyards in Delft" is qualitatively different from the other excisions in constituting a restoration. On the poem's transfer to *THBN* from *CID*, Mahon added a new final stanza that abandoned the oblique viewpoint of the original ending for one of outright denunciation (of the expansionist, patriarchal, Protestant order reflected in the painting). Critics were almost unanimous in condemning the stanza, and in *Selected* Mahon reverts to the original version of the poem, with the only difference his recycling of the phrase "fire and sword" from the now discarded stanza to replace "war" in the penultimate line:

While my hard-nosed companions dream of *fire*

And sword upon parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse.

(Italics added)

"Brecht in Svendborg" had comprised two poems in *THBN*, "A Danish

Refuge” and “To the Unborn”, the second of these, a free rendering of Brecht’s “To Those Born Later”, being the more generally admired. Yet for reasons known only to the poet it is dropped from *Selected*. *CID*’s “Songs of Praise” sheds two of its stanzas; “The Joycentenary Ode” and “A Garage in Co. Cork” lose a single stanza each, while “Girls on the Bridge”, with dubious gain, restores four stanzas excised on the poem’s transit from *CID* into *THBN*.

Mahon’s incessant tinkering with his poems insists on his continuing proprietorship over his poetry and on his unassailable right to change it at will. His habit of revising his work began early, as it did for Yeats and Auden. Likewise, the frequency and scale of his revisions also invite comparison with those of these mentors. Yet where Yeats and Auden, and that most sparing of revisers, Louis MacNeice, dutifully acknowledge and defend their changes in prefaces to their work, Mahon’s rare references to his own revisions are tersely factual and unaccompanied by any defence. Prefaces are *démodé* for a younger generation of poets, and his preferred means of conveying information of this kind is by way of a publisher’s note on the dust jacket. *Selected*, however, carries no warning at all of the many changes within.

Beyond publisher’s notes on the outer covers of *Poems* and *Collected*, Mahon has (to this reader’s knowledge) adverted to his revisions in written form on only two other occasions: first, in the essay mentioned earlier, “Derek Mahon on *Poems 1962-1978*” (1979), commissioned by the Poetry Book Society, and again in a 1991 interview with William Scammell marking the publication of *Selected Poems*. The essay takes the conventional form of a preface, as it moves from justifying the “premature and presumptuous” publication of this selection to explaining its contents and the order of poems. Only then does it broach the sensitive problem of the revisions:

I've taken the opportunity of making a few revisions, which annoyed some of my friends; but let them reserve their annoyance, I say, for a future occasion, when I'll probably make yet more. No poem, somebody said, is ever finished. Indeed, even with the page proofs beside me, I can see revisions crying to be made to the more *recent* poems; but it's too late, the book has gone to press.²¹

His friends' reaction makes the issue a personal one, but Mahon makes no attempt to address their criticisms directly. Instead, like Auden before him (in his 1966 foreword to *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*), he falls back on Valéry's dictum that "no poem is ever finished, only abandoned".²² The page proofs introduce a further echo, of Yeats' helplessness before the ever renewing need to revise his work (preface to *Poems, 1895, 1927 reprint*),²³ while the fate of his recent poems, crying out to be revised yet already gone to press, supplies a clarifying gloss on Valéry. Mahon is thus able to predict, with the slightest hint of defiance towards his friends, that there will be further revisions to come. For most poets publication is an economic necessity. Yet its deadlines have no necessary correlation with the natural rhythms of artistic creation. Publishing poems or exhibiting paintings thus lends a false air of "finality" to what may be considered by their creator as unfinished works.²⁴ And it is on this premise that the poet claims the right to revise.

Mahon's stated reason for publication is that only by putting this body of early work "behind" him could he then "move forward" to better things, abandonment thus serving the need for creative renewal, but in a statement elsewhere he has invited speculation that *Poems* may be the product of an artistic crisis.²⁵ A far more visible crisis, indeed, the longest creative hiatus he had experienced as a poet, ushered in *Selected Poems* and haunts the 1991

interview he gave to celebrate its publication. The interviewer's final question about the new work puts Mahon on the defensive:

The last poem in the book was written in 1985, so reviewers will say I am all washed up — a malicious libel based on a misunderstanding of the creative cycle. In fact, for reasons I am not disclosing, my best work has yet to see the light of day. The new *Selected Poems* is a tombstone — a handsome enough tombstone, but a tombstone none the less. Buy it, by all means, and complain about the finicky revisions and re-revisions, but don't imagine that that is the whole story. Valéry said that a poem is never finished, only abandoned; and there is more where that came from.²⁶

The tombstone trope is a startling one, but it is only a more truculent version of the funerary jesting the poet had indulged in the 1979 essay. In Valéry's terms, any poetry collection is, by definition, a graveyard of provisional readings and abandoned poems. But Mahon had also learned from the experience of publishing *Poems* that interrering the past could have a liberating effect, and it was an outcome he desperately needed at this low point in his career.

Opinions vary as to whether the works with which Mahon staged his creative come-back (*The Yaddo Letter* (1992), *The Hudson Letter* (1995), *The Yellow Book* (1997) and *Roman Script* (1999)) quite measure up to his claim that his "best work" would follow. But the evidence that he reinvented himself in the book-length sequences of the mid-90s is incontrovertible. Patrick Crotty, in a landmark essay on *The Yellow Book*, traces a connection between the new discursive style and expansive forms that made a first

appearance with "The Yaddo Letter" and increasingly frank intimations in Mahon's work of a successful conclusion to his long struggle with alcoholism.²⁷ In turn, the recovery of his poetic "lost nerve", triumphantly endorsed by the creative outpouring of the '90s, was almost surely a factor in his decision to bring out the *Collected Poems* (1999).

On its dust jacket, a publisher's note, briefer than that of *Poems*, announces: "This volume brings together, in updated form, the poems the author 'wishes to preserve' from the work of forty years." Put more simply, the *oeuvre* had found its final form and unknown changes had been made under the guise of updating. Despite the promise of its name, *Collected Poems* is another permutation on the tried-and-tested "selected collected" formula. Again the screening privileges recent writing while imposing rigorous limits on the inclusion of earlier work. The weighting towards the recent is also heavier than in the earlier selections, with 117 (42%) of its 276 pages given to poetry published in the four years 1995-1999,²⁸ a shift of seismic proportions in the shape of the *oeuvre*. The remaining 159 pages accommodate a selection of work from a period extending back to 1962.

With a dearth of reviews,²⁹ it is difficult to gauge immediate critical reactions to the poems excluded. *THBN* and *A* were represented in their entirety in *Selected*, so it was predictable that they would be hit hardest, but it is, nevertheless, dismaying to find such poems as "Brecht in Svendborg", "A Postcard from Berlin", "The Joycentenary Ode", "A Lighthouse in Maine", "St. Eustace" and "Tithonus" all absent from *Collected*. On the bright side, some poems denied a place in *Selected* make a welcome return, but their rescue simply accentuates the plight of others, doomed by exclusion to seemingly irrevocable exile. *Collected's* 123 items break down as follows: 17 from *NC*, 17 from *L*, and 14 from *TSP*; 13 first collected in *Poems* and 3 in *Selected*; 26 from *THBN* and 12 from *A*; 5 poems plus the title-sequence (18

poems) from *The Hudson Letter*, all 21 components of *The Yellow Book*, and 14 pieces from the recent poems and translations. Following his practice in the selection, Mahon gives no indication of a poem's date of composition or of the collection in which it initially appeared, and though the ordering is broadly chronological, thematic, visual and other considerations frequently override chronology in the actual arrangement of work.

Four poems from *NC*, excluded from *Selected*, are brought back into the fold: "The Spring Vacation" (now retitled "Spring in Belfast"), "Bird Sanctuary", "Jail Journal" and "The Poets Lie Where They Fell" (retitled "No Rest for the Wicked"). Two poems from *L* are rescued from oblivion ("Rage for Order" and "I Am Raftery"), and five from *TSP* ("September in Great Yarmouth", "The Mayo Tao", "The Apotheosis of Tins", "The Antigone Riddle" and "The Banished Gods"). Contrariwise, *L*'s "Deaths" and *TSP*'s "Three Poems by Philippe Jaccottet" both lose canonic status. Six poems from the same collections are retitled. Supplementing the two mentioned above, "Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieuc" becomes "Breton Walks", a reversion to its title in *Poems*; "Preface to a Love Poem" changes to "First Love"; "Dream Days" returns to its original title in *L*, "J. P. Donleavy's Dublin", while "Two Songs" is extended to "Two Songs for Doreen".

Most poems from *NC*, *L* and *TSP* follow *Selected*, but sometimes revert to readings in *Poems* or the original collection. There are certain revisions to punctuation (most notably, the joining of formerly separate sentences by semi-colons and the removal of hyphens), and adjustments to the spelling of non-English names. However, beyond such cosmetic changes, few poems are affected by revision, though when it occurs, it is generally heavier in poems from *L* and *TSP*. Two poems from *L*, newly returned to the canon, are heavily revised. "Rage for Order" revokes the changes introduced in *Poems*

and reverts to its original form and readings, while, amidst cuts and numerous verbal changes, the writer-in-residence of "I Am Raftery" is transferred from an East Anglian to a New England campus (updating Raftery's poem in line with Mahon's most recent experience). "Beyond Howth Head" retains its 22 stanzas, but fourteen are subjected to revision (including eight lines of rewriting) in the poem's third successive overhaul. Significant among the changes is the rewriting of the latter half of stanza 14:

and Washington, its grisly aim
to render the whole earth the same,
sends the B-52's to make it
safe for Chase and the stock market.

The new lines are similar to four cut from stanza 13³⁰ while Mahon was revising the verse letter for *Poems*, and one can only wonder why he had this change of heart. It is notable too that, while restoring the contemporary political edge of the original, the new lines avoid too obviously dating the poem. Three poems from *TSP* are resurrected with important changes. "The Banished Gods" returns with the two stanzas deleted in *Poems* (one and four) reinstated, while "The Mayo Tao" and "The Apotheosis of Tins", by dint of structural changes that compress them into compact longer-lined units, now fit onto a single page each. Both also introduce verbal changes, new in "The Mayo Tao", but mostly reversions to *TSP* in "The Apotheosis of Tins", which also loses some of its lines.

Three poems first collected in *Poems*, "Soles", "Midsummer"³¹ and "Beyond the Pale", are now dropped from the canon, while "The Sea in Winter" and "Light Music" submit to vast reductions in scale. The verse letter originally comprised 22 stanzas, shrank in *Selected* to 20 and, with the

cutting of eight of *Selected*'s stanzas (9-16), reduces now to 12. Thus with just two snips of the cutting scissors, Mahon updates the letter (by expunging his 1979 doubts about "this verse-making"), alleviates its gloom and rids it of a bunch of stanzas that been troublesome from the start. The result is a fine, tightly-wrought poem at ease in the timeless pages of *Collected Poems*. However, some readers will recall what was lost in the process. The evolution of "Light Music" follows a contrary arc, but the outcome is similar. The suite continued to expand up to 1990 (from 20 constituent poems at its 1977 début to 25 in *Poems* and 34 in *Selected*), but contracts to 22 here, those excluded consisting mainly of poems added in *Selected*.

Four poems from *THBN* and two from *A* are excluded from *Collected*, but of these, only "The Joycentenary Ode" and "Brecht at Svendborg" had undergone significant changes in *Selected*. The pattern of revision here to poems from *THBN* and *A* extends that in the selection: the changes are sparing and on the whole minor, but unexpected excisions affect a small number of poems. Contraction is also a notable feature of the new titles: "An Old Lady" > "Greta"; "Knut Hamsun in Old Age" > "Hunger"; "Another Sunday Morning" > "Sunday Morning"; "The Globe in North Carolina" > "The Globe in Carolina"; "Death and the Sun" > "Camus in Ulster",³² and in three cases anticipates a similar contraction in the body of the poem. "Another Sunday Morning" is probably improved by the shedding of its sixth (and weakest) stanza. However, "The Globe in North Carolina", which inexplicably has four of its eleven stanzas cut (4-7), loses with them some of its most memorable writing: its theoptic view of molecular cars arrowing the turnpikes, Carthage transformed into a ballroom for the wind and the future emerging from a scrunched Budweiser can. However, the most savage truncation of all, reduces "Death and the Sun", the showpiece poem chosen to conclude *Selected*, from seven stanzas to one. Retitled "Camus in Ulster",

all that remains (a truncated and partly rewritten version of what had been its third stanza), now offers little more than a resonant epigraph on Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'.

Given the revision history of his work, it is probably unwise to regard any change as final. Nevertheless, for admirers, revisions of this order to what seemed fully achieved poems can only register as bewildering. That, with hindsight, he occasionally restores a poem to an earlier and preferable state is happily confirmed by "Girls on the Bridge", which drops the four stanzas added in *Selected*. Unfortunately, unable to leave well alone, he succumbs to the same temptation to augment a poem in "Rock Music", which expands from two to four stanzas. The revision is all the more startling for its attempt to reconcile different styles: the ironic lyric formalism of the original with the relaxed, chatty style of the sequences of the '90s. Enclosed within parentheses and sandwiched between *THBN*'s stanzas, the new stanzas with their belated nostalgia for "Cinema organ, easy listening, swing, doowop, bebop" do nothing to improve a perfectly good poem.

Less spectacular changes include the rewriting of the final stanza of "One of These Nights", of the second and fourth stanzas, section two of "A Kensington Notebook" and the vexing ninth stanza of "North Wind: Portrush". Never one to waste a good line, Mahon recycles the phrase "Sex and opinion" from the cancelled fifth stanza of "Death and the Sun":

Meanwhile in the night of Europe, the winter of faces,
Sex and opinion...

to replace the words "a corpse-light" in the now drastically scaled-down second stanza of "October in Hyde Park":

Europe, after the first rain of winter,
glitters with *sex and opinion*.³³

(Italics added)

Finally, the switch from “Bitches” to “Generals” (“A Kensington Notebook”, 1, stanza 5) and from “farted” to the questionable “gurgled” (to describe the sound of motorbikes) in “Rock Music” suggest a continuing commitment to cleaning up his act. Similar is the prim substitution of “at the back of beyond” for “at the arse-end of nowhere” in *TSP*’s “The Banished Gods” (restored to the canon in *Collected*).

The remaining thirty-nine poems are taken from *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997), while fourteen recent poems and translations bring the collection completely up to date. Remarkably few poems are excluded, notable exceptions being the Audenesque light verse and occasional pieces from Part One of *The Hudson Letter*. “Pygmalion and Galatea” and “The Bird Life of Kinsale”, from the same pages, have their titles abridged to “Galatea” and “Bird Life”, while “The Travel Section” lives up to its name by its transfer into “The Hudson Letter”. “The Yaddo Letter” gets off with a handful of cosmetic changes, while the title-sequence itself is thoroughly overhauled with revisions, some extensive, to every section. Four sections acquire new titles (the untitled II and VIII becoming “Out There” and “Ovid on West 4th”, respectively, while “Auden on St. Mark’s Place” [X] contracts to “St. Mark’s Place” and “Imbolc: JBY” [XVII] to “Imbolc”). On its début, “The Hudson Letter” had been graced with title-page and section-head epigraphs, twenty-five in all, but of these only eleven are retained in *Collected*. Seventy-six lines also go from the body of the work, with the cuts at their most severe in “Imbolc” and “The Small Rain” [XVIII], which lose thirty-three lines between them. In “Imbolc”, with

now only a single surviving reference to John Butler Yeats' work as a painter (and the loss of such gems as his unfinished self-portrait and his interment in a borrowed grave), the excisions are more controversial. Elsewhere, though most strikingly in sections IX, X, XII and XV, the excision of limp and diffuse writing shows greater finesse, and the work is the better for it. Among the lines cut, some of the most resonant — the recall of Herbert's poem "The Flower" in III, of Yeats' "Ego Dominus Tuus" in the self-portrayal as "a disaffected boy — my face, like Keats', / 'pressed to a sweet-shop window' full of treats" [XI], and of Keats himself in recurring echoes of his nightingale ode — are literary allusions. These originally formed part of a vast network of literary and other citations in the work, and their departure, along with fourteen of its epigraphs, may indicate later doubts about its referential exuberance.³⁴

A total seventy-six lines are excised, but twenty new lines come in, some to replace cuts, some to bring in new ideas, others to adjust, especially lighten, mood (alleviating gloom is a conspicuous feature of the revision in *Collected*). New lines in I and XVIII strike a lighter, chattier note amid these sombre meditations, but their effect, like that of the stanzas added to "Rock Music", is mildly irritating. Similarly incongruous in its new setting is "The Travel Section", which, as a replacement for the ill-fated "Sneakers'" [VII], is Mahon's most startling revision to the work. "Sneakers'", a sort of 'found poem' wrought from snippets of overheard bar talk, had served as a kind of prelude to the sequence's second movement,³⁵ while recalling references (IV, V, VI) to the great liners that once berthed at the nearby Hudson piers. In contrast, "The Travel Section", freely based on Laforgue's "Albums", may be "an ironic critique of the romance of rural America",³⁶ but, as such, relates to little else in this quintessentially inward-looking, Atlantic-facing, metropolitan poem.

“The Hudson Letter” was a radical new departure in form and idiom but, as its first reviewers noted, precision and economy, the hallmarks of the earlier poetry, were not consistently exercised there. Mahon’s tacit acknowledgement of such criticisms can be read into the extensive overhaul the sequence undergoes in *Collected*. Other evidence suggests that the poet began to change the work even earlier, indeed soon after it had gone to press. Nothing else can explain the fact that when Wake Forest U.P. published the first American edition of *The Hudson Letter* within a few months of Gallery Books’ Irish edition, what should have been identical title poems differed substantially. The Wake Forest text reveals no fewer than 86 significant deviations, affecting nine of its sections (I, II, IV, VIII, IX, XII, XIII, XV, XVIII), from the version printed by Gallery. Furthermore, all of these are subsequently reproduced in *Collected*, except for a single change in XII (“even perceived losers have sometimes won” > “even perceived losers have often won”) and an addition to XV’s epigraph (the attribution “Marcabru”), both of which were casualties to a further round of revisions. A new line in IV, “where ice confines the crippled QE2”, reappears in *Collected*, though at a different point in the section, while XVIII’s “secret garden” (“magic garden” in Gallery’s text) had evolved, by the time it reached *Collected*, into an “enchanted” one. Wake Forest’s edition also carries six poems fewer than Gallery’s in Part One of the volume,³⁷ a departure that could probably be ignored were not four of these also absent from *Collected*. Which all seems to confirm that “nobody steps into the same [Mahon poem] twice”, even when change is least expected.

“The Yellow Book” had made its first appearance in print two years before *Collected*, and the changes made to its text resemble those in “The Hudson Letter”. Two sections are retitled (“Remembering the 90s” > “Hangover Square” [VIII], “Death in Bangor” > “A Bangor Requiem”

[XVIII]),³⁸ its opening epigraph and seven of its fourteen section epigraphs are cut (an eighth is replaced), and revisions, some extensive, made to every section (though in sections III, IV, XII and XIV these are relatively minor). The figures are approximate but, excluding instances where lines / half-lines are rewritten, a total of ninety lines (7.5%) are cut, and fifty-one new lines (4%) added. In percentage terms, these totals are similar to those for "The Hudson Letter", where seventy-six lines (8%) are dropped and twenty (2%) brought in.³⁹ "An Bonnán Búi" [VII] accounts by itself for thirty-one of the ninety cut lines. Conversely, it also receives the greatest number of new ones (thirteen). However, only five sections are net gainers. Reduction is closer to the norm with ten sections losing more lines than they gain. Further, in four of these, the bulk of the lines cut are harvested from the close. Most spectacularly, "An Bonnán Búi", drops a sequence of twenty-nine lines from its ending, but brings in thirteen as a substitute. "Hangover Square" [VIII] loses its last six lines with four as a replacement, while "At the Gate Theatre" [IX] sheds twelve and "On the Automation of the Irish Lights" [XIX] its final four, neither with compensation.

"The Yellow Book" was still a recent work when reprinted in *Collected*, and cuts and a certain amount of rewriting might be seen as inevitable. As in "The Hudson Letter", quality was uneven, and there were long stretches of poorly inspired writing. Patrick Crotty has noted a particular loss of tautness in the latter halves of certain sections,⁴⁰ a weakness partly redressed by the terminal cuts and rewriting instanced above. In contrast with its predecessor, apart from the cutting of more than half its epigraphs, "The Yellow Book" submits only to the lightest pruning of its "forest of intertextuality", even where references mass a little too densely. But with its stylistically improved opening poem and leaner, more personally focused "An Bonnán Búi" illustrating his revisions at their best, it is to Mahon's credit that much that

was slack or superfluous has been eliminated. Notable among the additions are guest appearances of a “foxy lady”, who “slips into her shoes” and leaves the poet “words of wisdom” in “Axel’s Castle” [III] and warns him that he’s “done for” if he drinks again in “An Bonnán Búi” [VII]. If the epithet “foxy” is intended as a clue that she is the “wildly decadent” you in “forbidden furs” addressed in “America Deserta” [XVI], so also is her straight-talking role, with its similar recall of the Connecticut Muse of “The Hudson Letter”.⁴¹ However, in neither addition is she addressed directly, as she is in that work, and her appearances are too fleeting to fit her for a comparable coordinating role.

Tobacco and liquor aside, Mahon himself is at his most wildly decadent in his penchant for lists and inventories, the most inventive of which, a twenty-four line catalogue of things yellow in “At the Chelsea Arts Club” [XI], carries excess to 1890s extremes. Accumulations of names, variations, attributes, as in this randomly chosen passage from “Smoke” [XV],

Geared up by Klein and Nike, Banana Republic, Gap,
 we are all tourists now and there is no escape;
 smoke gets in your face, in your eyes, up your nose
 but offers inspiration, aspiration, hope,
 lateral thinking, ‘pure speculative ether’,
 an a-political sphere above the weather.
 26. INT. RICK’S. A night-club, expensive, chic
 with an air of sophistication and intrigue....

recur so frequently in “The Yellow Book” as to seem a kind of stylistic tic, and the reader may be excused for feeling jaded with such repeated displays of exuberance. A couple of catalogues have been trimmed in *Collected*. More

commonly, however, they have been extended, new examples including itemized nostalgia for '60s Dublin in "To Eugene Lambe in Heaven" (VI), for Roman era second homes in "The Idiocy of Human Aspiration" (X), and for New York clubs with their "Lindas, Bridgets, Kates and Naomis" in "America Deserta" (XVI). Finally, among the recent shorter pieces, "Roman Script", first published in pamphlet form in June 1999, entered *Collected* in November of the same year with 14 textual changes.

That *Collected* is not the end of the story for the poems it includes — and perhaps even for those it excludes — was quickly confirmed by the presence of a fresh set of revisions in the new edition of *Selected Poems* (November, 2000). Its Contents gives 76 titles, 26 fewer than the earlier *Selected*, though if "The Hudson Letter" and "The Yellow Book" are counted as 12 and 13 poems each, the final tally is a similar 99. Unfortunately, *New Selected* is even less a selection of Mahon's poetry than *Selected*, since it draws poems exclusively from the curtailed *oeuvre* represented by *Collected*. Effectively it is an abridged *Collected*, following precisely the latter's order of work with only a light reshuffle of the first three poems. With 27 poems originating from *NC*, *L* and *TSP*, 12 from the new poems and sequences added in *Poems* and *Selected*, 19 from *THBN*, 5 from *A*, and 36 representing the poetry published since 1992,⁴² the proportions are very similar to those in *Collected*. The earliest collections are slightly down, while the proportion of work from *THBN* moves up from 16% to 19% of the total. *A* is a conspicuous loser with a mere 5 poems (5% of the whole). *THBN*'s increase may be partly explained by Mahon's foregrounding here of work subjected to heavy revision or else restored to the canon in *Collected*.

New Selected faithfully follows *Collected*'s readings but with significant departures in five of its poems. Beneath the title "Girls on the Bridge", in every single version of the poem up to and including *Collected*, there is the

legend “*Munch, 1900*”. In *Selected* this expands to include its Norwegian title “*Pykene na Brukken*” with painter and date following. However, in *New Selected*, the date is unexpectedly changed to “1901”. Munch’s work went through successive stages of revision and experimentation during his lifetime, with the result that many paintings (“Girls on the Bridge”, one of the more notorious examples) exist in multiple versions, some confusingly under the same title, and many more in the form of prints. Dates are thus crucial for distinguishing one variation from another in catalogues, and this perhaps accounts for the correction here. Though the revision itself is minor, it confirms how meticulously Mahon edited his poems for the new selection. A similar scrupulousness over small details is evident in the change from the British to the American spelling of “centre” in “World Trade Center” in “The Hudson Letter” [XII]. On this occasion, the revision impinges directly on the body of the poem, though without affecting its content in any substantial way. Like *Collected*, *New Selected* closes with “St. Patrick’s Day”, and though it requires a sharp eye to spot the change, “white belvedere” in stanza two is transformed here into a “bright” one. A further change affects “Key West” in “The Hudson Letter” [XVI]. The lady addressed in the 1995 version is wearing “a white bandana round” her hair as she drives the poet into Key West. The less romantic “your new sunglasses in” replaced this in *Collected*, but in a change of heart that can only raise hopes for other lost readings, he restores the original here.

The dubious honour of accommodating Mahon’s most drastic revision falls, however, to “North Wind: Portrush”. The poem made its début as “North Wind” in the pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft*. A year later it was collected in *THBN* under its present title. At the same time, it shed an epigraph and the details of composition at its close. The only other change was the replacement of “No high wind can disturb” as the sixth and final line

of stanza nine by the still awkward "No spring can unperturb". Eight years later the poem was reprinted in *Selected* unchanged bar a minor detail of punctuation in its third stanza. *Collected* brought in fresh revisions to stanzas two and ten and a second change to stanza nine. Evidently unhappy with "No spring can unperturb" as a rhyme for "*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*" in line two, Mahon translated the latter (at some cost to its allusive specificity) as "Naked lunch in the grass", thus clearing the way for a new line six: "No springtime can release". Doubts must have set in almost at once, for *New Selected* reproduces the version in *Collected*, but now drops its ninth stanza. Mahon has frequently resorted to cutting where a doubtful revision has failed the test of time, and this is almost certainly the latest instance. More significantly, as a major revision to a canonical poem, it questions the air of finality that pervades *Collected* and leaves his work once more open-ended. His readers may thus look forward or brace themselves for further changes to come.

Now in its fifth version after four rounds of revision, including a title change, "North Wind: Portrush" seems little closer to achieving a final form than it did on its printed début twenty-five years ago. It is impossible to predict whether the poet will take it up again, or whether this latest version has set the seal on its abandonment. But whatever the case, the instability of its textual history certainly lends credence to doubts raised by Paul Valéry and a host of creative folk since about the very notion of a finished work. Firm in his conviction that he is free to change his poems at will, Mahon has weathered much criticism, though a more tolerant view of his revisions appears to be emerging in recent essays on his work. Mahon himself has been notably reticent on the subject, though it has surfaced in oblique ways in some of his poems. "Rage for Order" and "Heraclitus on Rivers" both lay bare the semantic instability of language and, by inference, the burden this

imposes on the poet of constant rewriting. He has also projected himself into various personae, often poets and other writers, but also sometimes painters. In “The Forger”, for instance, as Hans van Meegeren, he recalls the “agony, the fanaticism / Of working beyond criticism” on his fake Vermeers;⁴³ while, in “The Studio”, as Edvard Munch, he displaces his creative agony and despair onto the furniture in his studio (something Mahon does *in propria persona* in sections I and XVIII of “The Hudson Letter”). However, the closest he has come to mirroring that perfectionist element in himself that goes by the name of “reviser” is in a different section [XVII] of that New York poem. Here we encounter John Butler Yeats, a highly gifted artist who, for all the urgings of his friends and creditors, could never finish a picture to his own satisfaction and exasperated friends had to carry away ‘unfinished’ work almost by force. Mahon chooses to memorialize the painter by his own self-portrait, begun in 1911 but which, eleven years and numerous layers of paint later, was left unfinished at his death. Fittingly, for a painter more given to revising than finishing work, he portrays himself “holding a palette knife rather than a brush, the hands vague”.⁴⁴ It is unlikely that Derek Mahon will be remembered in a similar way, but even more unlikely that his heavily impastoed work will ever reach a ‘finish’ that will meet his satisfaction. Nothing is ever ‘done’.

Poetry Collections Cited

[Abbreviations in square brackets]

Derek Mahon:

Twelve Poems (Belfast: Festival Publications, 1965).

Design for a Grecian Urn (Cambridge, Mass.: Erato Publications, 1966).

Night-Crossing (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). [NC]

Beyond Howth Head (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970).

- Ecclesiastes* (Manchester: Phoenix Pamphlet Poets, 1970).
Lives (London: Oxford University Press, 1972). [L]
The Snow Party (London: Oxford University Press, 1975). [TSP]
Light Music (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1977).
The Sea in Winter (Dublin: Gallery Press; Old Deerfield, Mass.: Deerfield Press, 1979).
Poems 1962-1978 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). [Poems]
Courtyards in Delft (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981). [CID]
The Hunt by Night (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). [THBN]
A Kensington Notebook (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1984).
Antarctica (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1985). [A]
Selected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991). [Selected]
The Yaddo Letter (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1992).
The Hudson Letter (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1995).
The Hudson Letter (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1996).
The Yellow Book (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997). [YB]
Collected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999). [Collected]
Roman Script (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999).
Selected Poems (London: Penguin Books, 2000). [New Selected]

Others:

Poets from the North of Ireland, ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1st edition, 1979; 2nd edition, 1990).

Notes:

- 1 "Derek Mahon on *Poems 1962-1978*" (1979), an essay specially commissioned for the Poetry Book Society. It is reprinted in *Thirty Years of the Poetry Book Society 1956-1986* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), pp.151-2.
- 2 Mahon acknowledges in the essay that his revisions had annoyed some of his friends, but goes on to warn that there will be more to come.
- 3 The incident is recounted by Timothy Hyman in *Bonnard* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998) p.126. Vuillard seems to have collaborated by distracting a guard while Bonnard retouched the painting. Similar instances are Whistler's borrowing of pastels he had sold only to return them later to their owners quite transformed, and Giacometti's painting of copies of his own bronzes at the 1962 Venice Biennale, without seeking the permission of the collectors who now owned them.
- 4 This figure includes "Night Song" and "Folk Song" as two separate poems. They are reprinted (as "*His Song*" and "*Her Song*") under the collective title "Two

Songs" in *Poems*. It also includes "What Will Remain", though it reappears with revisions under the title "Thammuz" in *SP* and again as "The Golden Bough" in *Poems*.

- 5 This figure includes "Thammuz", though it is effectively the same poem as *L*'s "What Will Remain", and also "Flying", which is incorporated into "Light Music" in *Poems*. Thus, a total of 46 poems are reprinted from *L* and *SP*, though three of these are absorbed into other works.
- 6 A full list of title changes follows. From *NC*, "Dowson and Company" > "The Poets of the Nineties"; "In Belfast" > "The Spring Vacation"; "Death of a Film-Star" > "The Death of Marilyn Monroe"; "De Quincey in Later Life" > "De Quincey at Grasmere"; "Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc" > "Breton Walks"; "Van Gogh among the Miners" > "Van Gogh in the Borinage"; "Recalling Aran" > "Thinking of Inishere in Cambridge, Massachusetts"; "As God is my Judge" > "Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy"; "Legacies" > "The Condensed Shorter Testament", and "The Prisoner" > "Jail Journal". From *L*, "Edvard Munch" > "The Studio"; "After Cavafy" > "Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy"; "The Archaeologist" > "A Stone Age Figure Far Below"; "J.P. Donleavy's Dublin" > "Dog Days"; "Gipsies Revisited" > "Gipsies"; "Night Song" and "Folk Song" > "Two Songs", and "What Will Remain" > "The Golden Bough" (via *TSP*'s "Thammuz"). From *TSP*, "Thammuz" > "The Golden Bough"; "Cavafy" > "The Facts of Life"; "The chair squeaks..." > "Nostalgias"; "Dead of Night" > "Postcards"; "After Nerval" > "The Mute Phenomena"; "A Hermit" > "The Mayo Tao"; "The Gipsies" becomes part of "Three Poems after Jaccottet", while "Flying" enters "Light Music".
- 7 In Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), pp. 111-129. Allen sees the impulse behind many of the structural changes in *Poems* as rhythmic and argues that the more confident rhythms of the revised poems define a shift away from the indecisive *poète maudit* persona of the early collections.
- 8 "April on Toronto Island" is almost totally rewritten. "Entropy" sheds twelve of its fifty-four lines. "An Image from Beckett" similarly loses twelve of its fifty-four lines. It is arguable that, with or without accompanying verbal changes, several other structurally modified poems also qualify as "extensively revised".
- 9 I counted 110 departures of all kinds from the version of "My Wicked Uncle" printed in *NC*. The suppression of seven lines and the addition of one new one accounted for thirty-seven of these departures. In addition to the change of title and the suppression of its section divisions, "The Condensed Shorter Testament" loses three of its fourteen 8-line stanzas and has four more wholly or very largely rewritten. With the exception of the penultimate stanza, every stanza incorporates

changes to several words. "Beyond Howth Head" is likewise a serious contender for inclusion in this list. It loses its epigraph and its notes, and has additions made to the dates and places appended at its close. More seriously, the letter shrinks as an entity from twenty-three to twenty-two stanzas, a change that involves the excision of the last four lines of stanza 13, the transfer of four lines from stanza 14 to make up the loss, the complete remodelling of stanza 14 with the addition of four new lines, and the suppression of stanza 15. In addition, stanza 21 (20 in the new order) is partially rewritten and stanza 23 (22) substantially rewritten.

- 10 An example is the complex evolution of "Morning in Brittany" and "Man and Bird", which made their first appearances as separate poems in Mahon's pamphlet *Twelve Poems* (1965). A few months later they were reprinted with minor changes in a second pamphlet, *Design for a Grecian Urn* (1966), but now as parts of a six-poem sequence, "Sequence Written on a Farm in France". "Man and Bird" was the second poem, while "Morning in Brittany", now titled "Dawn Coming down the Road", came fourth. A year later, and retitled "Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc, the sequence entered *NC*. "Morning in Brittany", renamed "Early Morning", now stood at its head, while "Man and Bird" retained its second position. "Nature Morte" and "Image from Past Life" (the former first and third poems) were suppressed, while "Late-Night Walk", now renamed "After Midnight", and "Exit Molloy" ended the sequence. All four poems showed minor changes. The sequence reappeared in *Poems* under its third title, "Breton Walks", and both "Early Morning" and "After Midnight" were partially rewritten.
- 11 Published within a few months of *Collected Poems* and presenting an abridged version of its text, it differs significantly from the earlier selections. It is discussed as a special case later in this essay.
- 12 Edna Longley, "Where a Thought Might Grow" (*Poetry Review*, vol. 81, no. 2, 1991). Michael Allen's recent study (see note 7 above) of the transformation of Mahon's poetic persona and its bearing on rhythmic and structural revision reveals that updating, far from being an isolated phenomenon, affects numerous poems in *Poems*.
- 13 One exception is Maurice Riordan ("An Urbane Perspective: The Poetry of Derek Mahon" in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *The Irish Writer and the City. Irish Literary Studies 18*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984, pp.169-179)). According to Riordan, with the exception of "A Disused Shed", *TSP* demonstrates an attenuation of energy. Recognizing this, "Mahon professed to begin anew, undertaking first a complete overhaul of his work for *Poems*".
- 14 The final appearance of this poem in print is among twelve Derek Mahon poems in the second edition of Frank Ormsby's anthology *Poets from the North of Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1979, 1990). Both editions carry revisions that

- either anticipate (in the 1979 edition) or reproduce (1990 edition) changes made in *Poems*. In both, "Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy" follows the original text in *L* but is headed by *Poems*' new title. However, where, in the second edition, poems like "In Belfast", "As God is my Judge" and "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" complete the switchover to *Poems*' readings, "Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy" does not introduce the structural changes made in *Poems*.
- 15 The three title changes not listed here that affect poems reprinted from *Poems* are "In the Aran Islands" > "Aran", "The Poet in Residence" > "Beyond the Pale", and "Surrey Poems" > "Midsummer" (a further case of a single poem surviving the dismantling of a suite).
 - 16 Six of the thirteen poems from *NC* show reversions to *NC*'s readings totalling 11 in all. Nine of the sixteen poems from *L* show reversions totalling 17 in all (6 of these are in "Beyond Howth Head"). The ten poems from *TSP* display only one reversion. Sixteen poems thus revert to their former readings on a total of 29 occasions.
 - 17 In a ground-breaking work on Mahon's revisions ("Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions", *Irish University Review*, 24, 1, 1994, pp. 27-37), Peter Denman draws attention to the fact that three entirely different poems in *NC*, *L* and *TSP* all contained the word "Gipsies" in their titles. Denman pointedly refers to the scrapping of *NC*'s "Gipsies" and the transfer of its title to *L*'s "Gipsies Revisited" in *Poems* as a case of a poem being "practically unwritten". *TSP*'s "The Gipsies" was integrated unchanged into *Poems*' "Three Poems after Jaccottet".
 - 18 "Derek Mahon: Interviewed by James J. Murphy, Lucy McDiarmid, and Michael Durkan" (*Irish Literary Supplement*, 10, Fall 1991, p.195). All of the changes listed above are reproduced in *Collected Poems* with the exception of "middle-class twits" (from "Afterlives"), which is there further revised to "middle-class shits".
 - 19 Edna Longley in a 1991 review of *Selected Poems* (see note 12 above) comments, "The reviser is older than the original poet-speaker-correspondent, and it shows in an inclination to curb the latter's slang and jokes."
 - 20 Discussed in detail by Peter Denman, pp.34-37 (see note 17 above).
 - 21 "Derek Mahon on *Poems* 1962-1978", reprinted in *Thirty Years of the Poetry Book Society: 1956-1986* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p.151.
 - 22 "On revisions as a matter of principle, I agree with Valéry: 'A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned'". Mahon cites Valéry once more in the 1991 interview, following Auden's translation more closely: "Valéry said that a poem is never finished, only abandoned." Valéry is more specific about the nature of the abandonment: "Un poème n'est jamais achevé-c'est toujours un accident qui le termine, c'est-à-dire qui le donne au public" (*Littérature*, 1930, p.46), which roughly translates as "A poem is never finished. It's always an accident that puts an end to

it, that is to say, gives it to the public."

- 23 "This volume contains what is, I hope, the final text of the poems of my youth; and yet it may not be, seeing that in it are not only the revisions from my 'Early Poems and Stories', published last year, but quite new revisions on which my heart is greatly set. One is always cutting out the dead wood."
- 24 Modern painting has an equivalent Valéry in Francis Picabia ("If a painting is finished, it's dead"). Mahon's periodic tinkering with his poems pales into insignificance beside the extended gestations, endless revisions, scrapings down and trashings that characterise the work of Willem De Kooning, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti and numerous others. For such artists, a termination date was seldom determined by a sense that the work was finished, but rather by practical considerations, like a model having to leave or a rapidly approaching deadline for an exhibition. For all three, the impulsion to take their works further, the rarity of satisfaction with what they had done, and the elusiveness of a final form often resulted in a great deal of work being destroyed. Bacon confessed that he tended "to destroy the better paintings, or those that are better to a certain extent. I try to take them further, and they lose all their qualities, then they lose everything", while Giacometti's tendency to wipe out every night what he had created during the day lends poignancy to what has survived.
- 25 In an interview with Willie Kelly, "Each Poem for me is a New Beginning" (*The Cork Review*, 2, 3, June 1981, pp.10-12), Mahon relates the uncertainty and self-doubt registered in the later poems in *Poems* to "a life crisis which I won't talk about now, except to say it's over and that my confidence has returned. I don't now question the value of what I'm doing to the extent that I did before."
- 26 "Derek Mahon Interviewed" by William Scammell (*Poetry Review*, Irish Issue, vol. 81, no. 2, 1991), pp. 4-6.
- 27 Patrick Crotty, "Apocalypse Now and Then: *The Yellow Book*" (Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002, pp.273-296. The earliest of these references is in "Dawn at St. Patrick's", the sole "new poem" included in *Selected*. Crotty allies the poem by subject matter (alcoholic drying-out) and style ("the sort of rueful, almost embarrassed self-consciousness that distinguishes the pose of the poems of the nineties from Mahon's classic manner") with the poetry that would follow *Selected*.
- 28 I include here "The Yaddo Letter", published as a pamphlet in 1992, but which made its first appearance in collected form in *The Hudson Letter*. The equivalent figures are 31 (27%) out of 114 pages for *Poems* and, if *Antarctica* (1985) supplements "Dawn at St. Patrick's" as "recent work", 27 (15%) out of 183 pages for *Selected*.
- 29 By an agreement between poet and publisher, copies of *Collected* were not sent out

for review. Hugh Haughton's review, "Heraclitus of the postmodern" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6 April, 2000), pp.28-29, which came out undeterred, appraises it as one of "the essential books of the late twentieth century". The review does a fine job of cataloguing the major cuts and exclusions in the work, and in the tolerant stance it adopts towards Mahon's incorporation of new ideas by updating, it defines a significant shift towards a more positive appraisal of the revisions.

30 Quoted p.6, above.

31 There part of "Surrey Poems". The suite was dismantled in *Selected* to leave "Midsummer" the sole surviving poem. "Beyond the Pale" (entitled "The Poet in Residence" in *Poems*) also underwent heavy revision in *Selected*.

32 Other title changes, not included in this list, are: "from *The Drunken Boat*" > "from *The Drunken Barge*"; "Table Talk" > "The Drawing Board"; and "Dejection" > "Dejection Ode"). It is difficult to discern any consistent tendency in Mahon's title changes beyond frequency. But, in the course of passing through three selected / collected editions, titles have tended to contract in length and certain favoured patterns (e.g. "The (—) (—)"; "(—) in / at / on (—)") have grown more conspicuous. Though the poet may well have had other motives for making the changes, "The Drawing Board" accords with the first of these patterns, and both "The Globe in Carolina" and "Camus in Ulster" with the second.

33 Recycling takes the form of amused self-plagiarism when "the spirit of empire / Fugitive as always" from *THBN*'s "Brighton Beach" is echoed in "Empire is fugitive" in stanza three, section four of "A Kensington Notebook". Self-quoting is even more conspicuous in the major sequences of the 1990's, where, for instance, "Girls all, be with me now / And keep me warm" from *NC*'s poem "Girls in their Seasons" is reprinted as a single line at the close of "The Hudson Letter", XIII; "A strange child with a taste for verse" from "Courtyards in Delft" provides "Who, once a strange child with a taste for vorse" in "The Hudson Letter" XII (this line is not reprinted in *Collected*); while section XV of "The Yellow Book" quotes *A*'s "Dejection" in its entirety with a wry acknowledgement of the fact in the switch from "twice" to "*thrice* come in from the cold". Examples can also be adduced where the two sequences borrow phrases from each other: for instance, "watered by truck-stop rainbow and sun-shower" ("The Hudson Letter": XII) provides "sun-showers and rainbows all the way through Lough" (*YB*: XVIII), while "the neon-fingered dawns and laser lights" of *YB*: XVI supplies the new line "roaming the streets at neon-fingered dawn" in *Collected*'s version of "The Hudson Letter": XII.

34 Reviews of the sequence on its 1995 début registered very mixed reactions to its proliferating intertextuality but more or less general agreement that the writing was uneven.

- 35 With its recollections of Harry Hope's bar in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, its alcoholic haze, its regressions into sexual fantasy and nostalgic yearning, "Sneakers" shows the poet taking the first step towards self-knowledge as he confronts the delinquencies of his past. The sections following, VIII-XII, continues this unsparing self-scrutiny through scenes of marital betrayal, family breakup, voluntary exile and homelessness.
- 36 Hugh Haughton, " 'The Importance of Elsewhere': Mahon and Translation" (Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), p.165.
- 37 The six poems absent from the Wake Forest edition are "The Birdlife of Kinsale", "The Old Bath-House Inscription", "Burbles", "River Rhymes", "Anglo-Irish Clerihews" and "The Yaddo Letter". The first and last named are the only poems to make a reappearance in *Collected*. The four poems that Wake Forest and Gallery print in common, "Noon at St. Michael's", "Pygmalion and Galatea", "An Orphan at the Door" and "The Travel Section", are textually identical.
- 38 In addition, the sequence's introductory poem ("Landscape" after Baudelaire) loses its title and is headed simply by the legend ("*Context: Baudelaire*").
- 39 These statistics ignore the replacement of section VII. If it is included in the calculation, the totals become 114 lines (12%) and 50 lines (5%), respectively.
- 40 In "Apocalypse Now and Then: The Yellow Book", mentioned also in note 26 above. Crotty appends a three-page discussion of Mahon's revisions in "The Yellow Book", and, for a far more detailed account than can be offered here, the reader is referred to pp. 294-296 of this essay.
- 41 In *YB*, but not in *Collected*, "America Deserta" carries the caption "postscript to 'The Hudson Letter' ". The addressee of the verse letter is celebrated in its own pages for her "frank speech" (XV) and as a "practitioner of tough love and conservation" (XVIII).
- 42 Sections of "The Hudson Letter" and "The Yellow Book" are counted here as single poems. From the former *New Selected* reprints sections I, IV, V, VII, VIII, X, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, and XVIII, and from the latter, I, II, III, VIII, X, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII and XX.
- 43 Peter Denman (see note 17 above) interestingly relates van Meegeren's forgeries to Mahon's own "poems in the manner of" other poets, and ultimately to his adaptations and translations.
- 44 This line and several details relating to JBY are from "Delinquent Patriarch" (Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*: Gallery Books, 1996), pp.84-87, Mahon's review of William Murphy's biography of the painter, "Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)". The review was penned in 1978, section XVII of "The Hudson Letter" some 17 years later. The lines about

Yeats' unfinished self-portrait (quoted at the head of this study) are not reproduced in *Collected*. The apocryphal story of friends carrying away 'unfinished' work has also been told in relation to painters who certainly could not be accused of infirmity of will. They include de Kooning, whose work was occasionally hauled away in a midway state on the eve of a show it was promised for, and Francis Bacon, an unhesitating trasher and cutter-up of anything he reckoned less than his best, whose friends tried to rescue what they could.