

Temperate and bloody nightingales : Derek Mahon's 'The Hudson Letter'

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Mahon's interest in the verse letter as a vehicle for informal reflection on larger themes showed itself early in his career, and in his first experiments — 'Beyond Howth Head' (1972) and 'The Sea in Winter' (1978) — with Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron' (1936) and 'New Year Letter' (1940) as his models, he carved out an epistolary style that allowed him to be formal and relaxed, witty and profound, serious yet conversationally at ease, all within the same compass. Writing from the Yaddo artist's colony in upstate New York, he returned to the form in 1990 with 'The Yaddo Letter'¹⁾, a belated attempt by a divorced father to rebuild the bridges between himself and his teenaged children (to whom it is addressed), and one of the most painfully personal things he has ever published. Indeed, unlike in the earlier verse letters, he goes little out of his way to accommodate its second tier of readers, and in its skirting of self-pity and detailing of his failures as a father, the poem retains much of the feeling of a private letter. However, its publication was probably no afterthought (Mahon warns his children that he is thinking of reading it to a wider audience in its final lines). And if its self-revelatory candour seems a radical departure from the tightly-reined reticence we had come to expect of him, it is clearly of a piece with the greater personal openness that marks his recent work. In this respect it shares ground with its companion piece in *The Hudson Letter* volume, for the guilt, self-doubts and anxieties that surface in this less than successful poem anticipate the quasi-autobiographical mode of self-representation Mahon adopts for its title poem.

'The Hudson Letter' (1995), spanning forty-four verse pages and eighteen sections, is his longest and by far his most ambitious venture in the epistolary genre. The approach is once more introspective, at times painfully so, but though there is some overlap with the earlier let-

1) 'The Yaddo Letter' and 'The Hudson Letter' appear respectively on pp. 27–31 and 35–77 of *The Hudson Letter* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1995). All citations from these poems (and also from 'Noon at St. Michael's' later) are taken from this edition. All other Mahon citations are from his *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999).

ter (recollections of the ‘magical London years’ of his still intact marriage; further awkward attempts to find home-ground with his children, etc.), the trauma that drives that work has largely receded. Home still awakens feelings of loneliness and loss, but memories of that ‘lost domain’ in the irredeemable past now alternate with radiant images of another home, the Connecticut house of the woman friend to whom the letter is addressed. Meanwhile, a special tenderness of tone in his words to her is the first of several clues that his addressee is a lover and the letter itself a discreetly coded love poem.

Stylistically Mahon has moved on from the octosyllabic eight-line stanzas (derived from Marvell via Lowell) he employed for his first verse letters and the jaunty Audenesque couplets that replaced them in ‘The Yaddo Letter’. Now, in a highly fluent and flexible style that owes much to his recent work in verse drama, the authentic rhythms of the speaking voice are played off against long discursive periods, effortlessly enjambed across metrically subtle, irregularly-rhymed lines, and the fundamental unit is the verse paragraph:

...Obviously I don’t mean
 to pen yet one more craven European
 paean to the States, nor would you expect me to,
 not being a yuppie in a pinstripe suit
 but an Irish Bohemian even as you are too
 though far from the original ‘Ballroom of Romance’,
 far too from your posh convent school in France.
 Out here, in the clear existential light,
 I miss the half-tones I’m accustomed to:
 An amateur immigrant, sure I like the corny
 humanism and car-stickers – ‘I♥NY’
 and yet remain sardonic and un-*chic*,
 an undesirable ‘resident alien’ on this shore,
 a face in the crowd in this ‘off-shore boutique’
 inscribed with the ubiquitous comic-strip blob-speak
 — LOVE ONE ANOTHER, RESIST INSIPID RHYME —
 exposed in thunderstorms, as once before,
 and hoping to draw some voltage one more time

or at least not die of spiritual cowardice.

'After so many deaths I live and write'

cried, once, Geo. Herbert in his Wiltshire plot:

does lightning ever strike in the same place twice?

Global Village [III]

Though the breathtaking diversity of this remarkable first experiment in the long poem form cannot be illustrated by a single quotation, a taste of its conversational ease and intimacy, of its delicate poise between the playful and the serious, and its deftly negotiated switches between the colloquial and the high literary can be savoured here. The passage also provides one of Mahon's rare close-ups of the woman he is writing to. Though the status of her American residence is not clarified, the Irish, cosmopolitan, and probably literary background she shares with the poet perfectly fits her for her role in the poem (one that recalls Elizabeth Mayer's in Auden's *New Year Letter*) as a fellow 'alien' with whom he can share his 'un-*chic*' observations and 'sardonic' wit. Beyond that, a relationship deeper than friendship may be glimpsed in his affectionate teasing and in the exceptional candour of the closing lines.

Another feature is the way the exuberant referentiality of this passage (Wolfe's 'The Bonfire of the Vanities', Trevor's 'The Ballroom of Romance', Herbert's 'The Flower' and Mahon's own 'Dejection' are only the most readily identifiable of these references) is supplemented by a pair of non-literary citations in upper-case ostensibly drawn from the city streets. Car bumper stickers and graffiti, the examples here, are ubiquitous features of the New York scene, along with advertisements, neon signs, and the non-stop flow of information emanating from newspaper stands, TV broadcasting stations and electric bulletin boards. The frequent incursions of such data into the poem imitates the way such kinds of information continually accost the eye on the streets of large cities, while their assemblage into verbal collages (as at the opening of sections VI and XII) foregrounds their role as a kind of metropolitan text.

In 'A Kensington Notebook' (1985), a poem that in a number of ways looks forward to 'The Hudson Letter', Mahon's systematic tying of allusion to the specifics of locale—

The operantics of

Provence and Languedoc

Shook the Gaudier marbles

At No. 10 Church Walk,

— gives the impression of an urban terrain, the early modernist Kensington of Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis, mapped out as a literary text (no street without its blue plaque or quotation). This dense intertextuality is integral to its pastiche of Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', but linked to a nostalgic recall of its Kensington setting, it comes close to fulfilling Walter Benjamin's ambitious project of creating an urban collage entirely out of quotations. Cultural mapping is conducted in a similarly *urbaniste* fashion in 'The Hudson Letter', where allusions and quotations proliferate in a density unprecedented in his work, and where an important sub-group of references to artists associated with New York coheres into a tribute to the creative resilience of that city. Beginning with Camus' bleak vision at the head of the first section — '*Sometimes, from beyond the skyscrapers, the cry of a tug-boat finds you in your insomnia, and you remember this desert of iron and cement is an island*' — this huge data-bank of citation includes a series of contrasting perspectives on New York itself. These form part of this larger *urbaniste* project of unravelling and deciphering the city, but as seen in the way Camus' antipathy and insomnia anticipate the poet's, they are also an important means of mirroring his plight and understanding himself. Or rather, of understanding that beleaguered 'I' who is here his poetic stand-in.

The distinction is an important one in a poem that fits the semi-confessional tone of 'The Yaddo Letter' to a fictional narrative broadly based on Mahon's New York experience (and one that purports to log his thoughts and actions on a single February day). The 'I' of this narrative is a middle-aged Irish poet, suffering a crippling loss of confidence in his work, alone and living a curiously weightless existence in New York, where he has come in search of a creative 'kick-start'. His musings on this predicament (the drifting purposeless of his life; the failure of this 'kick-start' to materialise [I]; the impending threat of illness, alcoholism and despair [II]; the city's existential unreality, magnified by his own sense of displacement [III], and a familiar entropic vision of history winding down [IV]) lend these early sections an introspective cast. Yet thanks to his ironic detachment before this simulacrum of his experience, Mahon is able to lighten their gloom with a good measure of wit.

I

The letter opens with a bleak wintry perspective from the poet's 'studio apartment' in New York's West Village. The icy streets give back a refracted image of his creative stasis, and the furnishings of his 'autistic slammer' exude the aridity into which his life has fallen. His plea for 'some restorative / laid like a magic wand on everything' and equally desperate appeal 'Oh, show me how to recover my lost nerve!' appear to be directed to an absent Muse, perhaps the letter's addressee, around whose country house the snow is pictured shining 'bright...this morning.' This brightness finds a complement a few lines later, where 'dawn's early light on bridge and water-tower' identifies the piece as a first-light poem. However, though it shares with earlier poems in this characteristically Mahonian genre, like 'Ford Manor' or 'Craigvara House', an uneasy faith in dawn's propitiousness as a time of creative renewal, it affirms their epiphanies through the distorting mirror of parody. Thus, the poet's lover is absent (she appears as a 'smiling Muse' in earlier poems), and he wakes from an almost sleepless night not to the dawn thrush's song (symbolising his restored access to creative power), but to the knocking of radiators and the clank of the first garbage truck. Meanwhile, five blocks away the ice-packed Hudson's impeded flow gives back a mocking echo of his own. Not that birdsong is entirely missing from this wryly-amused urban pastiche, but it is here a musical approximation to birdsong, serendipitously caught and precariously held on morning radio amid the competing jam of stronger airwaves:

Respighi's temperate nightingale on WQXR
 pipes up though stronger stations through the air —
 a radio serendipity to illustrate
 the resilience of our lyric appetite,
 on tap in offices, lofts and desperate 'hoods
 to Lorca's 'urinating multitudes'
 while I make coffee and listen for the news
 at eight; but first the nightingale. Sing, Muse.

Poignantly figuring art's diminished place in a world driven by appetites coarser than the

lyrical, Respighi's 'L'Usignuolo' recalls the immortal bird of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (stanza vii is quoted as a title-page epigraph) with its Romantic affirmation of the timeless solace afforded by beauty. Yet as his nightingale's voice 'found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth' and an enduring echo in her song, so Respighi's temperate bird brings a similar message of comfort, albeit a deeply ambiguous one, to her modern-day counterpart. And interpreting the encounter as an auspicious sign from the Muse, with tongue in cheek and in time-honoured form he invokes her aid in the writing of his poem.

Dawn singer, poet stand-in, comforter of exiles, the nightingale, with its cousins the swallow and blackbird, is also one of the classical heralds of spring. Yet spring remains elusive for the duration of the poem and, viewing the Hudson from the 10th Street Pier in *Waterfront* [IV], Mahon's creatively-blocked persona is forced to admit

I hear no Jersey blackbird serenade
This rapt friar on the Big Apple side.

Indeed, in this bleakest meditation in the poem, with MacNeice's epigraph threatening our demise before '*some new Ice Age*', and its photo-realist estuarine scene, brittle with ice and 'adrift with trash and refuse barges', discharging 'its footage into the blind Atlantic snow', his despair is at its deepest. But if spring is delayed, its imminence is palpable: 'the throes of a warm snap / so ice cracks far off like a thunderclap / somewhere along Bohemia's desert coast.' And, with Camus' '*desert of iron and cement*' reverberating, we find ourselves in the imaginative world of *The Winter's Tale*. This first of a series of allusions to Shakespeare's play re-maps Manhattan as a pastoral site, a place where seasonal and spiritual cycles coincide, where the unlocking of the human heart brings back the birds and flowers, and the long-awaited spring thaw is the concomitant of creative release. For with that 'thunderclap', the poem's seasonal scheme integrates with the yearning plangently voiced in its first section for a poetic 'kick-start' or inspirational lightning strike from heaven.

The unpredictability with which inspiration comes in a writing life is a recurrent lament in Mahon's poetry. (Randall Jarrell's remark, reproduced in a review²), that 'a poet is someone who stands out in thunderstorms, hoping to be struck by lightning, and a good poet one so

2) 'An Imprudent Poet' (a review of *Poems* by W. R. Rodgers), in Derek Mahon, *Journalism, Selected Prose 1970-1995*, ed. Terence Brown (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1996), p. 89.

struck five or six times in a lifetime' is recalled in Mahon's 'Dejection' and again at the close of *Global Village* [III].) The nine years of poetic silence between *Antarctica* (1986) and *The Hudson Letter* (1995) has certainly fuelled speculation that the crisis explored in the latter's title-poem is based on actual experience. If so, the publication of this major work represents a creative resurrection, even if its narrative modestly stops short of affirming one. Instead, we watch its protagonist wrestling with the demons of despair and the anguish of creative dryness, a contest that holds the key to an eventual return to wholeness if he can resist the temptations of self-pity and confront his failures. As in George Herbert's 'The Flower', alluded to near the close of *Global Village* [III], creative and personal renewal are inseparably conjoined. Yet where Herbert's 'T' miraculously buds 'in age' and once more relishes versing, Mahon holds his in a seemingly endless wintry stasis by confining his narrative to a single February day.³⁾

Early drafts indicate that what began life as a New Year poem⁴⁾ went through a temporary stage as a St. Brigid's Day (February 1st) poem before a final shift in date to February 14th, Katie Mahon's birthday. The change highlights his daughter's role as an agent of inner change: a kind of latter-day Perdita. It also sites the narrative — more credibly than St. Brigid's Day would have done — near the end of New York's exactly long winter, when the first intimations of spring are in the air. Spring comes round much earlier in Ireland, the poet wistfully recalls in *Imbolc: JBY* [XVII], as he pictures 'the daffodils out in ditch and glen / and windows soon flung wide to familiar rain'. Indeed, the word *Imbolc* here refers to the pastoral festival celebrated on February 1st (when ewes supposedly began lactating) which signified the first day of spring in the old Celtic calendar. Later renamed St. Brigid's Day, a saint in whose name lingers a curious echo of Brigit, the fertility goddess associated with the

3) The poem's eighteen sections (supplemented by the poet's retrospective of the sleepless hours in the early morning in *Last Night* [II]) span the 24 hours of a single day. Early drafts of several sections are headed by the hour. These are absent from published versions of the letter, but time indicators — 'listen for the news / at eight' [I]; 'Afternoon now' [VIII]; 'It's 9.00 p. m. London time' [IX], etc. — still liberally punctuate the text. I would like to express my gratitude to the Special Collections Department of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta for the invaluable help access to drafts and other materials in its Derek Mahon papers afforded this research and for other generous support.

4) The poem was started and set aside in January 1992 and again in January-March 1993. The earliest draft of the poem in the Derek Mahon papers is a New Year poem dated January 1993. The Chinese New Year backdrop of Chinatown [XI] may be a carry-over from this scheme.

festival, it still marks the start of spring in the Christian calendar. Neither Brigit nor St. Brigid is mentioned in the poem, but their names are recalled in that of Bridget Moore, the Irish immigrant girl who appears in its fifth section. Mahon may also have chosen the name because its contracted form 'Biddy' was almost a generic term in the early years of the 20th century for the countless young Irish women who had their passages paid by wealthy American families seeking servants.

'To Mrs. Moore at Innishannon' [V]⁵⁾, a letter home from her daughter, Bridget Moore, recently arrived in New York to take up domestic service, is one of several sections standing outside the poem's main narrative and related to it mainly by association.⁶⁾ In key respects, Bridget resembles the 17-year-old Irish immigrant girl recalled by her granddaughter Mary Gordon in the essay that provides the section's epigraph. Other clues, like her letter's New York postmark — predating the letter that contains it by one hundred years to the month — its Irish destination, its mixture of responses to New York, its witty turns of phrase and eye for absurdity relate her more closely to Mahon himself. Ben Howard has shown how her letter displaces the poet's feelings and sets them in 'a broader social and historical context'⁷⁾ that takes in both the collective pain of the Irish diaspora and 'exile' as economic necessity. At the same time, in Bridget's ambivalent relation to two different places, one a provisional 'home' (but where she will most likely marry, bear children and be buried), the other her real home (but which she may never see again), she unwittingly reveals the problematical nature of the term 'home'. Bridget's naïve patriotism, juxtaposed here with its American equivalent—

...Curious their simple faith
that stars and stripes are all of life and death —
as if Earth's centre lay in Central Park
when we both know it runs thro' Co. Cork.

5) It was published as an independent poem in *The New Yorker* on 20th March 1995.

6) In 'Resilient Rondeaux', *Sewanee Review*, 106: 2 (Spring, 1998), pp. 359–369, Ben Howard argues that an illusion of digressiveness was an attribute of the verse epistle in Renaissance theory, and that the poem's pretence of negligence, its apparently loose and rambling structure, conceals a tightly-organised design. Though the last point is incontestable, the poem's carefully ordered disorderliness may alternatively be considered as an aspect of its playful postmodernist eclecticism.

7) 'Resilient Rondeaux', *idem*, p. 362.

—distinguishes her from a modern existential 'exile' like Mahon himself, where identity sits in complex relation to patterns of belonging. Yet the way New York seems already to be challenging Bridget's preconceptions; her seesawing between attraction ('it's all fire and sunlight here in the New World') and repulsion ('drunken men, the roaring 'El', / the noise and squalour indescribable'), and the amusing juxtaposition in the letter's final words of home-sick longing with a hard-headed recognition of the material benefits of her new life in America all anticipate the dilemma that she and successive generations of her Irish-American descendants will eventually find themselves in: that of being ineluctably caught between cultures.

A first generation immigrant to a younger, rawer America, Bridget brings her own portion of 'fun', energy and resource to its 'teeming shore' and a special Irish ingredient to its melting pot (though Mahon would undoubtedly concur with Mary Gordon's reservations about 'the relation of the boiling potters to the main course').⁸⁾ The big gull sitting at the masthead of her ship all the way from Roche's Point to Montock, only to vanish 'with the breeze / in the mass'd rigging by the Hudson quays', appears to symbolise this transfer of vitality from the Old World to the New, while making a resonant addition to the poem's fund of avian lore. More significant still is the allusion couched in her words 'here I am / at last install'd amid the kitchenware' to Walt Whitman's calling over of the Ionian Muse as a source of inspiration for American poets⁹⁾ (not to mention transient Irish ones in search of a creative 'kick-start'). Could Bridget, with her Irish Catholic background and artfully coded literary connections¹⁰⁾, be a period-dress portrait of Mahon's Irish-American Muse?

A *bricolage* of news, stock market reports and solicitations from the seamier side of corporate America signals the narrative's return to the modern city. Section VI takes us up high above its financial heart, where two exotic sea-birds, Inca tern and Andean gull, peer down in 'crazy-eyed' disbelief 'through mutant cloud cover and air thick with snow-dust, / toxic aerosol and invasive car-exhaust' at New York's 'wised-up' millions lunching far below. Escapees from a 'storm-wrecked cage in the Bronx Zoo'¹¹⁾, these fastidious exiles seem like 'a transmigration

8) See 'More Than Just a Shrine: Paying Homage to the Ghosts of Ellis Island' in Mary Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls and Other Essays* (New York: Viking, 1991), pp. 123–127.

9) In Whitman's 'Song of the Exposition', ll.58–59, the Muse is described as 'Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay, / She's here install'd amid the kitchen ware!' I am indebted for this reference to Lucy McDiarmid in 'Coming in from the Cold', *Irish Literary Supplement* (Spring, 1996), pp. 20–21. A broader debt to this illuminating early review will be discernible throughout this paper.

10) Another of these is her smart address at No.1 Fifth Avenue, the present-day site of Ireland House, the Center for Irish Studies at New York University.

of souls' — patently those of the poet and his lady — their aloof disdain for the money-driven city recalling his sardonic sniping at New York's 'offshore boutique' and Bridget's timid recoil from a downtown 'glimpse of Hell'. Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' is again evoked in the birds' terrified hovering with no place to go, the 'alien corn of Radio City, Broadway and Times Square' and the equally inhospitable clouds above figuring the alternative perils for the modern poet of servitude to popular culture and lofty, out-of-touch irrelevance. (Mahon may be looking 'askance' here at the self-destructive compromises made in his own career when 'the real thing [wasn't] happening.'¹²⁾) The precariousness of their aerial balancing also recalls Respighi's lyrical bird just about holding its own on the Big Apple's airwaves, though a radio appeal from the 'Manhattan Avian Rehab Centre' actually rates their chances as less than fair 'in the fight for survival on the city street / with urban gulls, crows, and other toughs of the air'.

This reviewing of scenes, themes and images from earlier sections signals the close of the poem's first movement. In its next six-section movement (VII-XII), with its focus on the disintegration of family and the loss of home, the poet will begin to look inward for the causes that have brought him to this pass.

II

'There is no question there is an unseen world: the question is, how far is it from mid-town and how late is it open?' quips Woody Allen in one of the epigraphs to *Sneakers*'¹³⁾ [VII], the seedy waterfront bar where we rejoin the solitary poet seeking consolation among the lunch-

11) Mahon drew information for this section from 'Exotic Birds Flee Collapse of Bronx Aviary', a news item in the *New York Times*, 6th February 1995.

12) See 'Q. and A. with Derek Mahon', *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall, 1991), pp. 27–28. Here the poet concurs that translation has been one of his means of 'keeping the pen moving' during lulls in creative activity. In answer to an earlier question — 'When do you feel you have enough poems for a book?' — Mahon makes the revealing comment 'I'm slightly terrified of something I noticed in London, the kind of every-three-years-you-bring-out-a-book syndrome. I think there's something a little exceptional and distinguished about being silent for ten years, and then bringing out a thin pamphlet which is hard to come by.'

13) The replacement of *Sneakers*' by *The Travel Section (after Laforgue)* is the most major of the changes Mahon made to the poem to prepare it for its appearance in *Collected Poems*. *The Travel Section*, probably completed before he began work on 'The Hudson Letter', first appeared in *The New Yorker* on 9th January 1995.

time drinkers. With its recollections of that delusive refuge from reality, Harry Hope's bar in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Sneakers' is fittingly named. But it is also the starting point for this journey within.

It is difficult to pick him out in this crowded bar (he may be the 'friend' drinking 'mineral water') for, the poet is here a silent listener to the fragmented conversations from which the section is composed. Amid the heady din of the bar, two threads of conversation fitfully come into earshot, one recalling the great liners that once berthed at the adjacent Hudson piers and another that makes repeated returns to the compulsions of sexual desire. Both open vistas on the fantasy worlds in which the bar's patrons long ago took refuge and their habitual living in the past. However, their hiatus-filled talk is less significant for what it reveals about them than for its distorted imaging of the listener's inadequacies and delinquencies, his nostalgic yearning for the past and, luridly encoded in their visions of disaster, of the 'crack-up' that dislocated his life. Though they will move to the fore in the following sections, these private obsessions receive here only the most furtive of airings. Indeed, without the signposting provided by a series of refrain-like couplets, we would almost certainly be unaware of this extra freight. These couplets, the sole words not enclosed by quotation marks, express the resolve of a self-confessed sinner to re-direct his life—

*I've been a sinner, I've been a scamp
But now I'm willing to trim my lamp*

—and serve as a kind of interior monologue for the poet as he muses on the past. Reinforcing their message is a battery of urgent warnings to take action — 'Deal with it', 'Get a life.' 'Think about it' — in the bar-talk itself and an ingenious set of variations on the barman's cry 'Get outa here'. Both recall *The Iceman Cometh*, whose protagonist, Hickey, attempts to drive his fellow drinkers out of the bar so they can confront their alcohol-reinforced illusions. A similar willingness to confront his past failures is the first step towards self-knowledge in his counterpart here and brings with it with the promise of a thaw — one forecast in burlesque style in the closing lines:

'Shut that fuckin' door!' 'No shit.' 'Giddaddaheah.'
'Giddout your swimsuits, girls, the ice's broken!'

This obliquely-rendered introspection leads naturally to one of the most unusual versions of Ovid to appear in recent years (section VIII), one that encodes in myth what ‘The Yaddo Letter’ had dared to recall directly: the nightmare of his family’s break-up. The artistic risks taken in that uncomfortably personal poem give way here to the challenge of transforming Ovid’s tale of fiendish lust and bloody retribution (*Metamorphoses* VI, ll. 647–74, *Tereus, Procne, Philomela*) into a simulacrum of private trauma and of incorporating it into the fabric of his New York chronicle. That he pulls off both so successfully owes to a canny trust in the classical poet’s modernity, for by simply highlighting his self-aware cleverness, his taste for linguistic play and unedited violence, Mahon shows us Ovid in his latest post-modern guise. The insouciant tone of his translation, its unseemly humour, its macabre lingering over the revolting details of a father dining on his son, all faithfully reproduce the original. However, Mahon carries the tale’s knowing artifice one step further with his slick, outrageous rhymes (‘candlesticks’ / ‘depths of Styx’, etc.), his downgrading of printed page to draft, and by stepping out of the narrative in the final lines. The result is a potent distillation of the classical and modern: a metamorphic yarn that retains its unique Ovidian flavour and a sobering modern parable on the destructive energies unleashed by marital transgression and its terrifying rebound on the offender.

One of Mahon’s few departures from the original narrative is an unexpected show of sympathy for the monstrous Tereus (‘poor Tereus sipped his wine in solitary state’, etc). Though it dangles an important clue that the tyrant stands in for himself, the sympathy is entirely tongue-in-cheek and there is nothing here to suggest self-pity. Indeed, the sham compassion is one of a number of effects that heighten the comic absurdity of the scene and transform the king into an even more ludicrous figure than he is in the original. Conversely, where Ovid stays at a uniformly cool remove, Mahon’s sympathy for Procne and Philomela is unashamed and unambiguous. The section’s epigraph (from Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*) — ‘*Women are necessarily capable of almost anything in their struggle for survival and can scarcely be convicted of such man-made crimes as ‘cruelty’’* — offers a challenging reassessment of this bloodiest of tales, and though Mahon does nothing to diminish the stomach-churning horror of their revenge, his treatment of the sisters is ultimately exculpatory. How he contrives this is by a single telling excision from the original text. There, after their transformation to swallow and nightingale, the sisters still carry to this day bloody marks on their breasts and feathers as stigmata of their murderous deed (*neque adhuc de pectore caedis excessere notae, signataque*

sanguine pluma est).¹⁴ There is no mention of these stains in Mahon's version of the tale, where, unlike for Tereus ('turned into a hoopoe and is furious still'), their metamorphosis is an unequivocally liberating one and the nightingale takes her place in a literary tradition that extends down to this poem:

both of them changed in a twinkling into birds
whirring and twittering inches above his head,
swallow and nightingale hovering in mid-air.
One flew to the roof-top, one flew to the woods
where, even today, the nightingale can be heard
descanting in convent garden and Georgian square.

That Rory Mahon has not literally suffered Itys's fate is confirmed in the following section, (*Rory and Katie*) [IX], where, 'Uneaten' and over in New York for the World Cup, he drops by his father's place to call his mother 'five time-zones' away in London. (Distances, geographical and emotional, are meticulously charted as the phone temporarily unites this divided family.) Meanwhile, dad — an ironic self-spectator throughout — is discreetly taking a rest, but taking the phone for an awkward few words with his daughter Katie, his feigned repose quickly deserts him and he finds himself feeling 'like the worst kind of heel'. But it is not just the unpaid school fees. He knows that by neglecting her during these crucial years of her growth, he may have forfeited much more than just her respect. In the long, painfully moving address that follows, he can only hint at the love he dare not express directly as he attempts to bridge '3,000 miles of water' and win back his lost girl. Today (February 14th) is her birthday and Yeats's 'Prayer' for his newborn daughter is intermittently heard in these lines. More poignantly still, he ridicules his own longing in the valentine ("Be Mine'...'I Dream Only of You") that he would like to send her, but which his daughter, 'a precocious feminist' and a chip off the old block in her contempt for 'daft cards and naff hearts', would be sure to reject. Finally, donning a costume from *The Winter's Tale*, he hands her the key to her father's redemption that Perdita holds there:

14) Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), VI, ll. 669–670.

...my own prayer for my daughter
 would be, not innocence and ceremony
 exactly, but a more complicated grace...
 some rich myth of reconciliation
 as if a statue moved and began to live –
 for I like to think all this a winter's tale
 around a hearth (but whose?); and that when we tell
 the story ten years hence you'll be able to say,
 'Thou mettest with things dying, I with things new-born.'

But even as the firelight flickers about this restored family tableau, he recognises that there can be no return to the past. His daughter has grown while he was not watching, and he has forfeited the parental authority to tell her 'about the things [she needs] to know', a task now reserved for her mother. Nevertheless, the recognition of what he has lost opens the way for a new relationship that might allow him to win back that authority in a different form. The lines following quicken with a growing confidence as he distils the insights of his poetic experience into advice for his budding musician daughter. Addressing her as a fellow artist, one destined from birth to dream 'at all times our uninteruptable dream / of redemptive form', he evokes the loneliness, the patient watchfulness, even a taste of the suffering that all belong to the role. Then, in a characteristic 'theoptic' perspective, he recalls a film he has seen: Glenn Gould playing Bach to the Canadian wilderness, 'the great chords crashing out into empty space', then crossing time and space 'to explain ourselves in perpetuity / to our high-tech geological posterity' / at the frozen reaches of the galaxy'. This artistic compulsion to 'explain ourselves' to posterity is a reminder of his present creative impasse, but it is also a moving correlative of his desire to bridge the gulf between himself and his daughter across an equally daunting expanse of time and space. We are told nothing about Katie's responses at the other end of the line, but perhaps she will accept his invitation and visit New York after all..

Father and son's route¹⁵⁾ to Chinatown, where they will dine in XI, takes them past the

15) The poem's temporal cycle is matched by an equally carefully organised spatial one. Sections I-IX (with the exception of V, set in the not-so-distant environs of Washington Square, and of VI, in the skies above New York) are located in various places in the West Village. From X onwards, the

one-time residence of W. H. Auden in the East Village. An imagined glimpse of his 'cheesy, limestone face' as he looms 'gin in paw' at a dirty window is the starting point for a tribute (*Auden on St. Mark's Place* [X]) that points the redemptive current in Auden's work, while carrying over important concerns from the previous section ('the examined life'; the 'creative impulse' as 'a cure / for our civilisation and its discontents', etc). However, unlike the more fulfilled, gregarious Wistan of Paul Muldoon's '7, Middagh Street', the Auden we meet here is the melancholic poet of the later years, when Chester Kallman's lengthy absences and serial infidelities ('If equal affection cannot be, / Let the more loving one be me') left him much alone and, beyond homophobic phone-threats, much troubled by presentiments of death. Mahon's turning to these darker years foregrounds Auden's role as an *alter ego*, an alternative self, who, like Bridget Moore in the poem's opening movement and John Butler Yeats in its last, holds up a mirror to his own predicament.

Auden's lengthy residence in New York was the more remarkable for certain curious anomalies in the man himself: his aloof reclusiveness, at the core of which lay a formidable loneliness; the very low priority he gave to a place to live, and his intellectual-masochist's attraction to New York because, he is reported to have told Theodore Spencer, all 'the things he hated most were there more obvious and he was therefore in no danger of succumbing to their neon lures'.¹⁶⁾ Mahon's update on his mentor's vision of America's technological 'New Barbarism' has all the zest of a shared contempt:

...Lord of martini
and clerihew, who saw Rome and the other empires
fall, who were so insistent on your privacy,
who so valued personal responsibility,
what would you make now of the retentive *pax*
Americana, our world of internet and fax,
a still-thriving military-industrial complex,
situational ethics, exonerative 12-step programs,

narrative takes the poet and his son in a sweeping arc through Lower Manhattan, east to the East Village [X], south to Chinatown [XI], and southwest to Battery Park [XII]. The circle is completed by the poet's taxi ride back, past 'Judith's Room' [XIII] to Bleecker St. [XIV], and thence to his West Village apartment, where the final sections are set.

16) Quoted from Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (Heinemann: London, 1996), p. 176.

health fascism, critical theory and 'smart' bombs?

Indeed, indebted in various ways to Auden's 'New Year Letter', 'The Hudson Letter' reveals a similar 'grumpy' love-affair with the city and a similar detachment, while its protagonist's witty, yet half-appalled excursions through its post-modern kitsch and virtual-real 'reality' lend a wholly new relevance to George Berkeley's philosophy.

Yet the paradoxes underlying Auden's wartime 'defection' to America and choice of New York as his 'great good place' lend themselves equally to an ongoing enquiry (one that, Hugh Haughton has shown, permeates the *oeuvre*¹⁷⁾) into the relation of *home* to the complex compass points of modern identity. The poem's search for a more adequate sense of belonging than conventional images can now sustain begins with Keats's archetype of exile, 'Ruth...sick for home amid the alien corn'. Here identity and home relate simply and concretely, but as this image is successively reworked — Bridget, the Irish immigrant girl, 'install'd amid the kitchenware / in a fine house a short step from Washington Square'; the geographically displaced 'Inca tern and Andean gull', who have never known life outside the Bronx Zoo; Auden, the multi-cultural intellectual for whom 'exile' from 'homeland' is a self-chosen fate — the identities grow more complex and their relation to *home* increasingly problematic. All culminate in the figure of Mahon himself, self-portrayed in the poem as a lonely existential traveller for whom there can be no cyclic return to a welcoming hearth, only a continuing and possibly hopeless quest for a substitute sense of belonging.

Auden's insistence on 'the courage to be ourselves, / however ridiculous' is put to the test in *Chinatown* [XI], where Mahon dishes out some 'uncool' fatherly advice to his 'laconic son' as they dine in sombre mood 'amid the festive clatter of Son Low Kee'. The crackle of fire-crackers for Chinese New Year and the auspicious backdrop of 'a storm-lit sky' set the stage once more for a winter's tale restoration, while the ubiquitous spray-can warning 'DEATH IS BACK. FIND THE CURE' adds a requisite sense of urgency. His search for that cure has led the poet through some of the darkest passages of his psyche to confront the failures that have blighted his life and work. Now, in the 'serious medicine' he measures out for his son, we see him again taking steps to redefine and renew the bonds that once tied him to his

17) In 'Even now there are places where a thought might grow: Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon' in Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), pp. 87–120.

children. Not that this promises to be an easy task, as Rory's evasiveness before this questionable assumption of parental authority makes clear. But the poet's love for his son is not to be thwarted and, risking his contempt, he plays up his own absurdity in a scurrilous self-portrait that draws on Yeats's 'Ego Dominus Tuus':

But I recognize your strategies of evasion
 for I too was young and morose — worse, sinister — in youth
 a frightful little shit, to tell the truth,
 a disaffected boy — my face, like Keats',
 'pressed to a sweet-shop window' full of treats;
 a rancorous paragon of bile and sloth
 in the days of nihilism and alienation,
 though house-trained by your mother later on.

This vignette of his former wife, seen here in woman's time-honoured role of domesticating the brute male, is the key to what follows: a warning from father to son of the dangers of inveterate tendencies they share by gene and gender (references to *Gatsby* and *Peter Pan* clarify one of them: a regressive allegiance to the world of pretend). No doubt to his dismay, Rory thus finds himself alongside his dad in the exclusively male ranks of the poem's '*Unaufgeklärten*'. Yet none of this is taken too seriously, and Mahon's skilful management of tone as he 'holds forth' Auden-wise with some 'belated, functional succour' for his son — a delightful blend of fatherly concern, worldly-wise melancholy and Polonian tediousness — not only lends his words an unexpected authority, but ensures that the poem's own delicate equipoise between gravity and wit is never in serious jeopardy as he touches on matters close to home.

From the barkeeper's cry to *Sneakers*' lingering drinkers ('Have yiz no homes to go to?') through Ovid's tale of domestic horror to the poet's attempt to reintegrate his family, *home* has provided the movement's unifying thread and prevailing mood of nostalgic regret. Now, in its final section, Mahon moves beyond these private concerns to a larger story of home that has become one of the pressing issues of our time. *Alien Nation* [XII] spotlights the plight of the urban homeless, those marginalised citizens 'with nowhere to call home'. Here the poet and his son (*en route* to Rory's party 'below Canal') come upon a group of them in Bat-

tery Park, where ‘the moon-shadow of the World Trade Centre’ and an idyllic view of ‘Liberty’s torch glimmering over the water’ provide ironic perspectives on their dispossessed and ‘alien’ state. Mahon employs one of his epic verse periods to chart their exponentially growing population across a map of New York’s boroughs, endorsing the ‘alternative polity’ behind their improvised cities and recording an affinity with them in his own dereliction:

I know you and you me, you wretched buggers,
 and I’ve no problem calling you my brothers
 for I too have been homeless and in detox
 with baaad niggas ’n crack hoes on the rocks
 and may be there again for all I know —
 who, once a strange child with a taste for vorse,
 would lurch at 3.00 a.m. through drifting snow
 to the Lion’s Head, McKenna’s, the White Horse...

This offering of credentials in no sense exploits the misery of these ‘Poor banished children of Eve’. Rather, by openly admitting the gravity of the drinking problems that have been the darker complement of that ‘taste for vorse’, it confirms a fraternity — and a deeply felt compassion — earned at a terrifying personal cost. ‘Getting high or drunk may be the only way they know of alleviating their pain and disappointment’, the epigraph pithily avers.

The ‘disenchanted mobility’ that Hugh Haughton¹⁸⁾ sees as the paradigmatic lot of Mahon’s uprooted personae has its equivalent here in the aimless back and forth travelling (*‘Third box-car midnight train to Bangor, Maine’*) of his homeless brothers. ‘We are all far from home’, the poet explains, linking his nostalgia to theirs with the memory of ‘a caravan parked in a field above Cushendun’.¹⁹⁾ Yet the ‘we’ of these lines likewise comprehends the reader, and near the section’s close where we are pictured all ‘out there’ clutching ‘our bits and pieces’, our collective experiences of displacement come close to figuring a universal plight. For which, of course, there are no easy remedies, no welfare facilities, shelters or soup kitchens, only ‘the capacity to cope, to endure and to empathize’, which Neil Corcoran takes as one of

18) *Idem*, p. 90.

19) See ‘Q. and A. with Derek Mahon’ (*op. cit.* 11) above). Asked in this interview if he still thought of Belfast as home, the poet answered in the negative, adding ‘I suppose home for me would be a little place in County Antrim called Cushendun, where both my children were baptized’.

the instructive lessons of the poem.²⁰⁾

The poet's parting from Rory in the thunderstorm that has been threatening for much of the day brings to a close this family-centred movement. A 'wild-flower-scented' breeze blowing in from the ocean brings with it a further promise of spring. It heralds the arrival of the poet Sappho, who, as erotic lyricist and priestess of love, embodies the theme of the final movement, the paradoxes of love.

III

Sappho in Judith's Room [XIII] is the exotic complement to that more homespun exercise in literary cross-dressing *To Mrs. Moore at Innishannon*. Both take the poem on a temporal detour while retaining its New York setting and in both the narrative is taken over by a distinctive feminine voice and discourse.²¹⁾ Interesting too is the way Bridget's sea-voyage from Ireland with its allusive recollection of the migration of Whitman's Muse looks forward to the passage of Plato's 'tenth Muse' (a modern Muse of female writers) from her native Lesbos to late twentieth century New York. There, 'relishing the historical ironies in store', she finds herself in a feminist bookshop where

The authors are all women, and I myself
am represented on the poetry shelf
(miraculously, I hold here in my hands
stanzas exhumed from the Egyptian sands).

For not only have her poems survived, albeit in fragmentary form, but Alcaeus, her chief rival ('whose high style was more 'serious' than mine') in the male-dominated world of early Hellenic poetry, is now forgotten. Sappho's prediction of her immortality²²⁾ as a lyrical poet has thus been fulfilled and, irony of ironies for this proto-feminist and champion of women, a new

20) See 'Resident alien: America in the poetry of Derek Mahon' in Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 154.

21) Early drafts show that, at an early stage in the composition of the poem, Bridget and Sappho sat next to each other in sections VI and VII.

22) 'I have no complaint /.../ Prosperity that / the golden Muses / gave me was no / delusion: dead, I / won't be forgotten.' Mary Barnard (trans.), *Sappho* (Boston: Shambhalla, 1994), p. 105.

female domain of writing is so in the ascendant that it has its own bookshops. Sharing shelf-space, however, with poets of a new polemical ilk like Eavan Boland — whose poem ‘The Journey’ makes Sappho her guide through an underworld populated by ‘women and children in their extremities’ — she is quick to differentiate her aesthetic:

my theme is love and love’s *daimonic* character,
 a site of praise and not of grievances
 whatever the torment — which we meet, if wise,
 in our best festive and ingenious guise.

Sappho’s reluctance to associate herself with this new ‘cult of contention’ has an obvious premise in her forging of a new aesthetic of the senses under the oppressive shadow of Homer (‘A corps of men, a list of ships? Give me instead / my non-violent girls’), but it can also be seen as a determined stand against the misappropriation and misinterpretation her poetry has been subject to over twenty-five centuries. (Susan Sontag’s epigraph co-opts her aesthetic and the disservice done her work by its interpreters — by no means all feminist or polemically inclined — into a broader plea against the tyranny of hermeneutics.) Yet if Sappho has little time for the ‘grievances’ of modern gender politics, the witty, down-to-earth, engagingly sensual woman Mahon resurrects from the shards and fragments of her poems speaks to us here as our contemporary, as a spokeswoman for her sex and a poet who fully merits her iconic status.

Memory and desire interacting as a bridge between separated lovers is a recurring motif in Sappho’s fragmentary *oeuvre*. Mahon reproduces her tender, erotically charged longing for the ‘glamorous’ Anactoria (‘somewhere over the sea’), past joys distilled and desire endlessly prolonged by the delicately sensuous image of the moon rising over the sea. An adaptation of one of her longer surviving poems, with imitative ‘fill-in’ of his own, it reveals his exceptional skill — honed by years of translation — in inhabiting the imaginations of other writers. And if the longing here seems of a piece with the tangled and unresolved yearning that haunts the outer poem, it also anticipates its focus in an absent woman. This highlights Sappho’s role as an *alter ego*, a poet who can confirm her own resilience and, shelved with

'Djuna, Janis, Gloria, Brooke and Kim', still has 'bad girls' aplenty to 'keep [her] warm'.²³⁾

Not so the poet, whom we rejoin in *Beauty and the Beast* [XIV] shopping for the consumer delights of Frank O'Hara's New York poems ('juice, croissants, Perrier, ice-cream and Gitanes *filtre*') before returning to his bachelor apartment for another night in alone. But at least he has a VCR, and tonight he can console himself by putting on the 'original, uncut' 1933 movie hit *King Kong* with the new spin it gave to the old tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' and its bitter-sweet perspective on love's destructive power. Obliquely acknowledging a debt to Marina Warner's essay 'Beautiful Beasts'²⁴⁾, Mahon calls the movie a 'cultural critic's dream', yet far from indulging in semiotics himself, his persona's simple delight in its action and in surfing the VCR ('I sit here like an old child with a new toy / or a creature from outer space') relates him to the lost boys of the epigraph and the menacing figure of King Kong. And there is nothing arbitrary in this matching of the boyish and the brutish, for both belong to pre-civilised lost worlds untouched by the domesticating power of woman (or the dangers of her love), at least until the mother-like Wendy and the Hollywood legend, Fay Wray, come along.

The first scene he replays, in which, in an act strangely redolent of idolatry, Kong 'installs' Fay Wray 'on the high rock where he lives', establishes a fundamental opposition between the huge gorilla, a primordial figure of unrestrained savagery, and his 'chivalrous' modern counterpart Robert Armstrong, who comes to rescue the screaming blonde from his libidinous clutches. Nevertheless, contrary to all expectations, the ape neither devours nor 'interferes' with his bride-sacrifice ('though he does *paw* and sniff his fingers, actually / eyes bright with curiosity'), and the assault comes instead from another primitive inhabitant of Kong's jungle kingdom — 'gryphon, roc, / velociraptor, hoopoe, some such creation'. What this cleverly reenacts is the change central to the fairy tale, for simply by looking on the face of Beauty, 'Sensitive Kong' is transformed from Beast to a 'desiring, aspiring, frustrated, tragic male'.²⁵⁾ And, by sublimating his Terean impulses, the 'poor sap'[s] fate is sealed.

Mahon now moves fast-forward to the final scene, an ironic doublet of the one just viewed, where, still clutching the diminutive Wray, the 'Eighth Wonder of the World' scales 'the sheer side of the Empire State'. Warner clarifies the way the film gradually shifts the audience's

23) A nice irony, in a poem full of amused self-plagiarism, is the way Sappho pays back Mahon's liberal appropriations from her *oeuvre* by stealing a couple of his lines: 'Girls all, be with me now / And keep me warm / Before we go plunging into the dark for ever' ('Girls in their Seasons').

24) In Marina Warner, *Six Myths of Our Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

25) Warner, p. 78.

feelings away from fear and loathing to sympathy for Kong, who is seen not only as the victim of his hopeless love for Wray but as ‘an emblem of civilisation’s savagery’. Wray becomes the bait to entrap and enslave the mighty ape and, after falling to his extinction among the crowds below, the film is unequivocal in assigning blame: ‘No, it wasn’t the aeroplanes; it was Beauty killed the Beast’.²⁶⁾ However, no equivalent case for nature and instinct is made in the poem, where the anxiety in this final scene is wholly for Wray’s safety and where, effectively sanitising this subversive fable, the poet kneels in homage to her in the final lines, his simian *alter ego* by his side. Indeed, their obeisance cuts through the complex responses the film invites to privilege the very simplest reading of the Beauty and Beast story as a tribute to woman’s civilising power. Or, at least, appears to do, for a tell-tale air of self-mockery and playful irreverence (‘clutching Fay...‘like a suppository’) leaves room for a modicum of doubt, while, more than a tribute to a movie idol, the section reads like a coded message to a lover from ‘the monster of her dreams’.²⁷⁾

Though the assumption of an addressee is a standard device of the genre, the fact, or rather inference, here that she is a lover certainly justifies such obliqueness. Glimpses of her in the letter are notably sparing, and relegated by convention to a postal distance, she remains sequestered in her snow-bound country house for the duration of the poem. All of which makes her a rather shadowy figure. However, from both what we are told directly and inferences drawn from the content of the letter, we build up a picture of a bookish, scholarly woman, the poet’s match in wit and learning, and perhaps one with some interest in feminine issues. Indeed, a woman very like the ‘you’ recalled in ‘Noon at St. Michael’s’, the poem that heads *The Hudson Letter* volume:

a funny face
 but solemn, with the sharpest mind I know,
 a thoughtful creature of unconscious grace
 bent to your books in the sun or driving down
 to New York for an evening on the town.

.....
 While you sit on your sun-porch in Connecticut

26) The film’s closing words, quoted by Warner, p. 78.

27) Warner, p. 80.

re-reading Yeats in a feminist light,

I am there with you.

Nevertheless, without the extra clues afforded by poems like 'America Deserta' (section XVI of *The Yellow Book*) and 'St. Patrick's Day', presumably addressed to the same woman, we might hesitate to add the word 'lover', so reticent is the poem about this most significant aspect of their relationship. An explanation might be sought in the constraints imposed by the poem's semi-fictional narrative or by the epistolary convention itself. Yet, whatever the case, where in 'St. Patrick's Day' Mahon could be totally candid—

For we too had our season in Tír na nÓg,
 A Sacred Heart girl and a Protestant rogue,
 chill sunshine warming us to the very bone,
 our whole existence one erogenous zone—

here he chooses to go underground. One feature of 'The Hudson Letter' that distinguishes it from Mahon's earlier experiments in the genre is the daring liberty it takes in introducing 'extraneous' material — like Ovid's metamorphic fable of the revenge of Procne and Philomel — to the here and now of its New York narrative. Impinging on that narrative by analogy and association, such episodes help to extend and deepen its thematic concerns, but they also challenge its exclusively male outlook when their 'speaker' (in Sappho's case) or 'writer' (in Bridget Moore's) happens to be a woman. That, in selected instances — Bridget, Sappho, Fay Wray and the 'remote enfamilied chatelaine' [XV] could all be cited here — the poem's female characters additionally stand in for or embody attributes of its addressee is an inference based on the planting of carefully laid clues (Bridget's Irish Catholic origins), on the intuition of a private level of discourse operating beyond the text (Sappho's riposte to polemical feminists), on her playing in duo with a projection of her lover (Fay Wray and the chatelaine), or on some combination of these.

The reader may pause before this projection of a clandestine romp by the poet's lady through some of its scenes (though she does play opposite him *in propria persona* in XVI), though can hardly ignore the poem's foregrounding of gender polarities and gender concerns. Muse-lover, guardian of the hearth, house-trainer, beast-tamer, object of devotion,

woman in her various roles is exalted as man's (or, at least, Mahon's) chief source of growth, of guidance, inspiration, of love and redemption, while he, in a corresponding set of chastened roles, is obliged to confront his 'strategies of evasion', his alcohol-reinforced escapism, the brutishness of his instincts, and similar regressive traits. 'Why so few poems for the women I know?' Mahon asks himself in a similar self-confrontation near the close of *Beauty and the Beast*. And if the answer offered seems less than satisfactory, the deficiency is partly made up by the act of redress that makes this his most woman-populated, gender-conscious poem with its large cast of female characters, its conspicuous debts to women writers, its dedications and tributes to gifted women, its intrepid ventures into feminist issues and his own self-projection here as an idealist and lover of women.

Domnei [XV] reveals him unashamedly in the latter roles. Its title, signifying 'lady service' in Occitan, alludes to the brief reign of *amours courtois* in 12th-century Languedoc, before the Albigensian Crusade brought to a bloody close ('at Béziers and Montségur') its innocent experiment in gender relations. And it is there, or more accurately, to some 'star-lit corner of the soul' where still 'sings /...the intense troubadour / in his quaint language' that he now leads us. The troubadour's idealisation of the object of his love (his trope of feudal fealty effectively reversed gender roles by making the lady his lord, himself her vassal), the 'formal continence' of their relations, plus the fact that she invariably belonged to someone else lend retrospective meaning to Kong's worship of Wray, while teasing us with the shadow-play of a more private scenario. The troubadour's unrequited 'homage' beneath the window of his love certainly fits Mahon's self-projection as a loser (yearning at windows in the cold or pouring rain recurs as a poignant image of loss in the poem), but it is not until his voice begins to merge with that of the Gascon minstrel Cercamon that this scenario begins to unfold. First, it is to share the concern expressed in his satiric poem 'Pus nostre temps comens'a brunezir' that the world has become too libertine ('Now that we all get laid and everyone swings?') and love a tool in cynical power games — which is surely for Mahon, as for Cercamon, an oblique means of affirming the integrity of his love. Then, in a delicate reworking of lines from the Gascon's love songs 'Quant la douche' aura s'amarcis' and 'Ab lo temps qe-s fai refreschar', discreetly modified to accommodate his own situation and thematic concerns, he kneels before his 'enclosed loved one' in the closing lines:

'but when the earth renews itself in spring

and whitethorn flowers to hear the blackbird sing
 I too sing, although she whom I admire
 finds little to her taste in what I write.
 I praise not only her clear skin and fine eyes
 but also her frank speech and distinguished air;
 so dumbstruck am I on her visiting days
 I can find no words to speak of my desire
 yet, when she leaves me, my composure flees.
 No-one I know can hold a candle to her
 And when the world dims, as it does tonight,
 I see the house she goes to blaze with light.'

Mahon's most striking deviation from his source, the lady's return to her radiantly lit home after one of her 'visiting days', reveals the coding at its most transparent; indeed, close to being dispensed with altogether. That point is finally reached in *Key West* [XVI], where she appears *in propria persona* driving him down through the Florida Keys to an island destination that continues to rival Manhattan in its allure for poets. Linked to the main narrative by a handful of sea-moss and the sound of rain, the section recalls a brief spell of happiness from the previous summer²⁸), framed by the impending threat of a hurricane and ominous thoughts on the fragility of 'any structure / presumed permanent'.

Key West is liberally sprinkled with literary allusions to tempests and storms, but draws its chief inspiration from the Key West poetry of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop and Hart Crane. Wallace Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West' looms large behind the transcendental yearnings that are the complement here (as they are in his poem) to a tragic sense of life's evanescence. Yet where his vision of order manifests with the descent of night, Mahon characteristically turns to dawn for his epiphanic threshold:

Later, exhausted hens on the telephone lines,
 disheveled dogs in the flooded Bahamian lanes:
 chaos, *triste tropique* — till, mauve and rose,

28) The section is actually based on a visit to Key West that took place in June 1995.

flecked with pistachio cloud, a new kind of day arose
 and I saw why once to these shores came *other* cold
 solitaries down from the north in search of love and poetry
 —the mad sailor, the stuffed bullfinch blue and gold,
 the shy perfectionist with her painter's eye—
 to sing in the crashing, galaxy-lit sea-porches.
 It was one of those far-out, raw mornings, the beaches
 littered with dreck, and a derelict dawn moon,
 mountains and craters in visible cameo, yearned
 close to the Earth as if murmuring to return,
 milk of what heavenly breast, dew drenching the skin—
 a wreckers' morning, with everyone a bit lost
 as if landed from Senegal or the Ivory Coast.

Mahon's pastel-tinted dawn is the gentler face of the hurricane and, while representing the kind of inspirational vista that drew poets like Crane, Stevens and Bishop (and with whose quest he identifies here) to Key West, it inevitably recalls the conjunctions of storm and dawn that figure in his own poems about inspiration. Indeed, the exquisite lyricism of these lines, with their subtle echoes of the poems of these precursors²⁹, stops only just short of figuring his poetic redemption as they impose artistic order on the 'chaos' left by the storm.

In contrast, the witty, laid-back tone of Crane's later poems (it is recalled here in such lines as 'the outskirts of Key West, when we got there...were still where they were supposed to be') provides an outlet for a sceptical detachment that, while never at odds, neatly balances out the lyricism. Crane, like Bishop, wrote a number of poems about hurricanes, and his late uncollected poem 'Eternity' — a cool, half-amused report on the havoc unleashed by one — may well be the source of the doleful menagerie of exhausted animals and of other details in *Key West*, while its final snapshot of Crane in 'Mack's' bar drinking Bacardi and 'talking / New

29) Bishop's 10-year stay in Key West saw the refinement of her distinctive style of word painting. Mahon dips into her lucent verbal palette for the pastel intensity of his Floridian dawn and also perhaps for his evocation of the mute undersea world a few lines earlier. A possible echo of 'The Idea of Order at Key West' can be heard in 'galaxy-lit sea-porches' (cf. Stevens's 'fragrant portals, dimly starred').

York with the 'gobs'³⁰) is patently the inspiration for:

...and remember, this wintry night, that summery place—
 how we strolled out there on the still-quaking docks
 shaken but exhilarated, turned to retrace
 our steps up Caroline St., and sat in Pepe's
 drinking (rum and) Coke with retired hippies
 who long ago gave up on the land and settled among the rocks.

With its waterfront setting and self-exiled clientele, Pepe's looks back in turn to Sneakers' and to 'The Terminal Bar' (of Mahon's *Courtyards in Delft* volume), that terminal refuge from the meaninglessness of all enterprise. Intimations of catastrophe make Pepe's a similar haven; yet far from closing *Key West* on a gloomy note of resignation, the lovers' retreat to the bar, 'shaken but exhilarated', strikes a very different chord. Love's frailty is surely implied in Mahon's bleak catalogue of earthly impermanence ('and thought of the fragility of all architecture, / the provisional nature even of aerospace'). Yet that love can provide a stay amid the all-encompassing forces of chaos is as surely the consolatory implication of these lines.³¹ Love receives a similar romantic endorsement in that earlier glimpse of Mahon's lady coolly driving them into Key West, 'Satchmo's 'Wonderful World' on the car radio'. But it is also elevated by the quest of those '*other* cold solitaires down from the north' and by the way it transforms this storm-racked trip in retrospect into a 'summery' idyll.

However, memories of the past summer are not the poet's sole preoccupation this wintry evening. *Imbolc: JBY* [XVII] shows him on the brink of making the difficult decision of ending his New York exile and returning home to 'that land of the real [he] left in '91'.³² The initials in its title — curiously paired with the old Celtic spring festival — are those of the Irish painter John Butler Yeats, whose letters to his celebrated poet son our poet is now

30) For this parallel I am indebted to Jamie McKendrick, 'Earth-residence', *Times Literary Supplement* (12th April 1996).

31) There is a further recollection of 'The Idea of Order at Key West' in the lovers' retracing of their steps to the town. In one draft of the section this is a night scene lit by streetlights.

32) Though Mahon returned to Dublin each summer during his 1991–5 American stay, the award of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1995 freed him from the constraint of further teaching in U.S. universities and allowed him to return to Ireland to work full-time on his next major sequence, *The Yellow Book* (1997).

reading. 'A recovering Ulster Protestant' like himself, Yeats found his lifetime's fulfilment, however, by taking the contrary course: absconding from home and family at the age of 68 to live out the rest of his life in New York. Mahon's even-handed portrait of this delinquent patriarch provides a vision of a course that still remains open to him and an outlet for genuine misgivings about the return.

In a review of William Murphy's biography³³, Mahon likened the elder Yeats to Oscar Wilde, who also 'put his talent into his work and his genius into his life'. It is fitting then that a piece of vintage Wilde should introduce the portrait: 'There is something vulgar in all success; the greatest men fail, or seem to have failed'. By all conventional standards, Yeats's genial improvidence and indifference to 'commercial rage' (his inability to complete portrait commissions was an unending source of frustration for his sponsor, John Quinn) carry the unmistakable stamp of failure. Yet they are the very credentials that earn him his place in Mahon's pantheon of scapegrace heroes. And a very affectionate place, for not only did his reckless unworldliness go hand in hand with the highest artistic integrity, but his self-realisation amid the penurious hardships of his New York years is perhaps the finest illustration of what he meant by 'the poetry of life'. The phrase appears in a passage that with suave economy condenses a series of letters exploring the old man's ideas about the personality and its necessity to artistic creation:

...But first you met by chance at the riverside
 a young woman with a sick child she tried to hide
 (not out of shame, you felt, but anguished pride),
 soft-spoken, 'from Donnybrook', amid the alien corn.
'It pained me that her bright image should fade.'
 Thus your epiphany, and you wrote to explain:
 'The nightingale sings with its breast against a thorn,
 it's out of pain that personality is born'
 (same thing for the sedge-warbler and the yellow bittern);
 and, knowing that we must suffer to be wise

33) 'Delinquent Patriarch' (a review of *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)*) in Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*, ed. Terence Brown (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1996), pp. 84-87

unless, 'like Raphael', we avert our eyes
 from a dying infant or an unhappy wife,
 you recommend 'the poetry of life'.

Skillful editing here fuses the insight earned from a painful encounter with an Irish beggar woman (that portraiture serves as a spiritual scourge by keeping alive and intensifying suffering) with a second insight, that only out of 'pain' can the 'personality' that begets art, and thus art itself, be born. Yeats's story of the bloody nightingale — drawn from the original Hellenic source of Ovid's tale of Procne and Philomela — lends a touch of homely wisdom to this paradigm of the creative process, while bringing the poem's avian lore to a culminating focus with its vision of the artist as an archetypal sufferer. Meanwhile, in that figure from the darker side of Irish emigrant experience, the Donnybrook girl who applies the thorn to the old man's compassionate breast, may be seen an avatar of the old earth-mother Brigit presiding both over his spring-in-winter renaissance and the return of the daffodils to 'ditch and glen'.

Yeats's endless revisions to his self-portrait, 'more sketch than picture' and still unfinished at his death, poignantly image the arduous process of self-realisation, as they do his quest in his life and his art for an unobtainable perfection ('nothing is ever 'done'). And though — as a die-hard agnostic — his unwavering belief in the world about him and in the essential goodness of the human species made him peculiarly 'at home here and in human nature', his eighteen-year stay in New York and borrowed grave ('a woman friend's family vault beside Lake George') not only challenge conventional notions of home and belonging but identify him as a paradigmatic figure in his multiple displacements: a man who 'lived and died / like all of us, then as now, 'an exile and a stranger'.³⁴⁾ And it is on this note of existential unease that we move into the final section.

The Small Rain [XVIII] completes the poem's temporal cycle by situating the poet close to the threshold of sleep. Indeed, the ellipses that mark his fitful lapses into slumber and the hynagogic intensity of some of its imagery confirm Lucy McDiarmid's description of it as a 'falling asleep' poem.³⁵⁾ Here recapitulating themes and images in symphonic fashion, Mahon

34) Yeats had a different notion of exile in mind when he wrote to Susan Mitchell on 6th October 1916: 'I am an exile and a stranger. I am not alluding to my exile in America, but to the fact only too obvious, that I am a survivor, a late lingerer from another generation — and so *demodé*.'

35) See Lucy McDiarmid, *op. cit.* 9) above. One draft version of the section twice refers directly to the poet's drifting off to sleep.

brings to a culminating focus the preoccupations that have exercised his persona: the drifting aimlessness of his life, his anxieties about creative failure, and his irrepressible yearning for the warmth and security of home:

Once upon a time it was let me out and let me go—
 the night flights over deserts, amid cloud,
 a dream of discipline and fit solitude.
 Now, drifters, loners, harsh and disconsolate,
 ‘inane and unappeased’, we come knocking late;
 and now it’s take me back and take me in.
 So take us in where we set out long ago,
 the magic garden in the lost domain,
 the vigilant lamplight glimpsed through teeming rain,
 the house, the stove in the kitchen, the warm bed,
 the hearth, *vrai lieu*, ranged crockery overhead—
 ‘felicitous space’ lost to the tribes.

This ‘felicitous space’ is a familiar one; however, its vigilant lamplight and returning hero identify a debt to Marina Warner’s ‘Home’, the concluding essay of her *Six Myths of Our Time*. Mahon’s rewriting here of the Odyssean *nostos*—discredited by Warner as perpetuating a no longer tenable myth of the hearth and gender relations—is his means of bringing that story up to date. For her, ‘the domestic hearth, coded female, once burned to the side of the great events with which the homeward-bound hero busied himself, and returning home, he could ‘shut the door on history’.³⁶⁾ But, alas, no longer: for Mahon’s updated Saint-Exupéry-type voyager, longing for the warmth of the domestic dream, is more likely to be welcomed home by a Penelope who shuts the door on him (‘I do hate people who come knocking late,’ Eartha Kitt warned on the title-page). Home may well be Yves Bonnefoy’s ‘*vrai lieu*’, but it is now ‘lost to the tribes’ of dispossessed and lonely males who — at this ‘hour of the locked door and the shut gate’ — find what shelter they can in the city’s streets and subways. And for whose suffering (‘Heart murmur, insomnia, liberal conscience, night moans, / forensic fears’),

36) Marina Warner, *op. cit.* 24) above, p. 112.

their brother the poet serves here as an empathetic listening post as he shares their vigil.

The objects in his room, 'brisk with a bristling, mute facticity' that connects them with 'the greater community / of wood and minerals' to which they belong, turn his thoughts to the durability of the inanimate and his own mortality. But it is the prints and posters pinned about his room, reflecting not only his fastidious and eclectic taste but also a heritage that briefly 'belongs' to each successive generation, that most closely engage his attention. '[A]ll primal images in their different ways', they poignantly recall his verbal art, which, like his favourite among them, an 'unsigned' Munch-like study 'picked up at a yard-sale in Connecticut', may 'somehow' survive its creator. Echoes of Keats's nightingale ode, spring flowers exuding a heady scent of death, and memories of deceased friends and contemporaries carry the meditation towards a very different threshold.

Then, in a characteristic long perspective that recalls his enquiry of Yeats 'in the black hole' ('Imbolc: JBY') and the metaphysical probing of 'The Globe in North Carolina', the poet searches the night sky for some source of revelation. As in that earlier American poem an ellipsis signals his turning away from the perplexities of otherworldly speculation to the palpable reality of an absent woman. This shift from cosmic mother to earthly lover follows a similar trajectory here into love-song, but at the same time re-enacts the epic voyager's return from the trials of exploring unknown worlds to the safe haven of a woman's arms:

... I pretend
 you're here beside me; guardian angel, best friend,
 practitioner of tough love and conservation,
 I'd say make all safe and harmonious in the end
 did I not know the voyage is never done
 for, even as we speak, somewhere a plane
 gains altitude in the moon's exilic glare
 or a car slips into gear in a silent lane...

For this brief moment Ithaca is located on the American mainland and his lover, explicitly identified as such for the first time, is invested with all the virtues of a Penelope true. Yet home with its timeless and unchanging woman can no longer provide the story's end, and for the deracinated modern Odysseus, for whom *home* is a nostalgic lie or an imponderable

abstraction, ‘the voyage is never done’, but must go on through a succession of Ithacas, one of which might just be ‘home’. ‘Home lies ahead, in the unfolding of the story in the future — not behind, waiting to be regained’, Warner’s epigraph explains, re-charting the heroic voyager’s course on co-ordinates drawn from the multiple compass points of modern identity. The poet’s yearning here for the warmth and security of his absent lover (Odysseus’s yearning merging with that of the mariner of the anonymous sixteenth-century lyric³⁷) that gives the section its title) is thus cut short by the imperative of a new departure — prefigured by the haunting cameo of an ascending plane silhouetted against ‘the moon’s exilic glare’.³⁸ A deeply resonant, late 20th-century vision of ‘rootless’ mobility illuminated by cosmic eviction, it also evokes a continuing poetic quest and, with this poem and the predicament it records now firmly behind him, the liberating impulse to move onward.

The poem’s justly praised and much quoted ending has a hypnagogic intensity that locates the poet at the very portal of sleep. Logical connections dissolve and oneiric ones replace them as familiar aspects of the Manhattan landscape shape-shift into biblical, mythological and literary equivalents before giving way to a mysterious and deeply moving vision of the return of spring:

fish crowding the Verrazano Bridge; and see,
even in the icy heart of February,
primrose and gentian.

It is the closest that Mahon might modestly come to figuring his creative recovery, the goal of the quest that has impelled the work forward from that first desperate cry ‘Oh, show me how to recover my lost nerve!’ to the power and authority of these final lines. That the poem grew out of a crisis similar to the one that afflicts its protagonist seems very likely (explicit details in early drafts and unguarded comments in interview give substance to the shakier evidence of those nine lean years). Yet, whatever the case, coming so long after his previous

37) ‘Western wind, when will thou blow, / The small rain down can rain? / Christ, if my love were in my arms / And I in my bed again!’ From Elizabeth Knowles (ed.), *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.

38) This completes a series of lunar images that begins with Mahon’s parting from Rory ‘beneath the moon’ [XII]. It includes Sappho’s sensuous lunar trope of separation [XIII] and the ‘derelict dawn moon’ of *Key West* [XVI], both of which resonate here.

poetic volume, it is a triumphant demonstration of Mahon's creative resilience, an endorsement of his faith in the creative cycle and a riposte to those critics who had prematurely written him off.³⁹⁾ Moreover, followed in rapid succession by a second major sequence *The Yellow Book* (1997), *Roman Script* (1999), his *Collected Poems* (1999) and several more recent poems and translations, that resilience has been on almost constant display ever since.⁴⁰⁾

At the close of the long quotation (from *Global Village* [III]) with which this study began, the poet's persona dejectedly evoked the miracle of poetic resurrection in Herbert's poem 'The Flower'. 'The Hudson Letter', Mahon's most comprehensive exploration of the anguish he shares with all creative souls, though something short of a miracle, is its own answer to the doubt it raises about lightning striking in the same place twice. Like George Herbert in his Wiltshire plot, Mahon too seems to have tapped into some creative voltage. 'After so many deaths', he lives and writes.

39) Mahon proved to be remarkably prescient in a 1991 interview with William Scammell ('Derek Mahon Interviewed', *Poetry Review*, 81: 2 (1991), pp. 4–6), when, referring to his *Selected Poems*, he commented: '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.'

40) Including poems from *The Hudson Letter* volume, this recent work occupies 110 of the 288 pages in *Collected Poems* (1999).