

Toying with Alternatives: Off-Center Resistance as Creation in the Poetry of Derek Mahon

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Abstract:

Since 2005, in the collections of the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, ex-centricity and resistance have played a central role in his depiction of contemporary world changes affecting Ireland. Dealing with globalization, the economic crisis, increased immigration and climate change, Mahon tackles the major challenges of our day while defining a framework to his own agenda as poet and inhabitant of the earth. As these concerns appear very explicitly in the poems, three main tropes shape his poetic response: resistance and flight, migration, and the constant search for alternative modes of creation and living. He achieves these through the delimitation of unmapped spaces or abandoned sites, usually on the periphery.

Keywords: Derek Mahon, margin, migration, periphery, resistance

The poetry of Derek Mahon is international in its scope and local in the minute observation of its surroundings. Mahon's scrutinizing poetic eye bears testimony not only to the beauty and calamity of the natural world, but also to the seismic changes faced by the societies of today. As Mahon witnesses the crumbling of the world economic systems as well as the destruction of the environment, he explores the causes and consequences of both on humanity as a whole and on his own poetic stance. It is particularly striking that throughout his career, Mahon's poetry has often been deemed to be, to use an expression from the poem "First Love", "at one remove" (1999, 18) from the political turmoil of Northern Ireland because of his refusal to comment on it. Detachment and distantiation, both intellectual and geographical, have been indeed at the centre of his poetic programme for many years. In recent collections, it seems that a more politically engaged voice is to be heard, or at least one more explicitly concerned with the ills of current society, in what Mahon calls in the poem "Insomnia" from *Life on Earth* these "interesting times" (2008, 23). Recent collections such as *Harbour Lights* (2005), *Life on*

Earth (2008) and *An Autumn Wind* (2010) thus focus on the financial crisis and on the urgency of facing the challenge of pollution and climate change.

Such topical concerns may seem surprising coming from a poet whose ironical take on social questions has been frequent. This change of perspective in Mahon's writing is a fascinating reminder of the relevance of poetry as a commentary on the present. Moreover, the opening of new trajectories nourishes and renews the interest Mahon has always had for place. The poet's concern for cartography, displacement, home, and his own quest for the "right place" all participate in a mapping of extraordinary spaces: transit vistas, abandoned sites, peripheral areas, marginal locations. The originality of the geography Mahon thus delineates lies in the nature of these spaces, as they function as places where one can hide or escape from globalization. Fleeing from the standardization, uniformity and ultimately sterility of a globalized world triggers a poetry which favours the ex-centric. In exploring the possibilities of ex-centricity, Mahon also develops alternative modes of creation, through resistance and flight. Mahon's poetry is first and foremost persistently concerned with disclosing the real in all its authenticity and fugitive apparitions. Such a programme encapsulates a form of resistance to the corporate world of globalization, since Mahon is in search of the real and not its fake marketable representation promoted by consumer society. Looking for the real means uncovering the traces of the present as well as re-reading historical or mythical narratives, in search of a reality of truth which is both ephemeral and atemporal. Mahon's work on margins and peripheries eventually leads him to the very core of the creative matrix, where ex-centricity disappears in favour of a complete alignment of generative forces as in the poem "A Building Site". What we will study in this paper is how ex-centricity is a poetic method in Mahon's recent collections. First of all, different forms of resistance will be brought to light. Then, I will analyse the very spaces of ex-centricity, through movements of displacement, migration and flight, and through the staging of unmapped spaces on the periphery. Finally, Mahon's search for alternative modalities of creation, as well as his invention of temporal, fictional or even historical alternatives will be explored.

1. *Resistance*

In recent collections, the theme of resistance is central and consists in remaining on the margin of a homogenized world. Mahon illustrates diverse types of resistance, to globalization and to the corporate world. Ultimately, it becomes the only means of accessing the real and not its fake marketable ersatz. Resisting to the world's mainstream capitalist values triggers the definition of places and times of creation on the periphery, out and away from a standardized society. Before analyzing these very places, we shall study how resistance literally becomes a creative stance.

1.1 "Resistance Days"

The first pages of *Harbour Lights* are composed of the 169 lines of the aptly named "Resistance Days" (Mahon 2005, 13-18). Dedicated to the photographer John Minihan, these lines are a celebration of resistance as creation, in a form and tone that recall some of Mahon's previous epistolary poems such as "The Yaddo Letter" or "The Hudson Letter" (1999, 182, 186). The poet first hints at his resistance to modern means of communication, as he prefers to use traditional postal services to email: "The sort of snail-mail that can take a week / but suits my method, pre-*informatique*, / I write this from the St. Louis, rm. 14". Using the notion of "method" in the second line of the poem makes of resistance a system. Writing from Paris, the poet's *persona* is presented as being on the move, coming back from Tangier, Morocco.

A few stanzas are devoted to the poet's recollections of his trip to Morocco. He there refers to Wyndham Lewis's work *Journey into Barbary: Travels Across Morocco* published after his visit to the country in 1931. Even if Mahon presents Wyndham Lewis as also being "in flight" from his life in London, "from daily mail" and "tube station", he deplores that the authenticity that Lewis must have encountered has now disappeared: "of course, most things are different since his day". In Mahon's portrait of that part of Northern Africa, local populations are shown resisting the tourists' intrusion: "but the proud Berbers of the west resist / the soul-stealing gaze of the 'western' tourist". In spite of their resistance, the real has been replaced by its marketable reproduction. Mahon thus expresses this standardisation: "as everywhere the filmable populations / have now been framed in shinier compositions, / the open prison of the corporate whole, / for even dissent has long been marketable".

The specific example of Morocco leads the poet to a more general denunciation of globalization. Stanza six opens on a direct statement of what the poem's title "Resistance" was alluding to: "Now our resistance is to co-optation, / the 'global' project of world domination". Mahon also deplores the overwhelming signs of capitalism through "crap advertising" and "the damned logo everywhere you look" or the "corporate space" which annihilates dusk in "During the War" (Mahon 2005, 32).

Representing the real and defining it has been a constant and fruitful trope throughout Mahon's career. Within the context of the poet's condemnation of the devastating effects of a money-driven civilization, the real has become a dead artifact: "No art without the resistance of the medium': / our own resistance to the murderous tedium / of business culture lays claim to the real / as product, no, but as its own ideal".

Mahon's incessant focus on the instant when the real is perceived and recreated in a moment out of time and chronology is linked here to the art of photography. As I have mentioned before, Mahon's friend the photographer

John Minihan is the addressee of the epistolary poem “Resistance Days”. Throughout, Mahon intertwines his own perception of localities he travels to with other previous visions of these places, then juxtaposed to some of Minihan’s iconic photographs. Morocco is thus compared to Wyndham Lewis’s account of the local population and landscape from the 1930s and put into parallel to Minihan’s series on Athy, his hometown in County Kildare: “Of course, most things are different since his day: / looking like Katie Tyrrell and the old folks / in your own ‘sublimely gloomy’ Athy pix”. Amid representations of the landscapes and cityscapes he encounters, Mahon repeatedly alludes to Minihan’s photographer’s eye: “you with your Nikon would go crazy there”; “I wish you good light or a light in a mist”. He seems to assume that Minihan’s art is an exemplary resistance to a merchandised world utterly devoid of authenticity. Mahon defines his art in such terms: “live seizures in the flux, fortuitous archetypes, / an art as fugitive as the life it snaps / [...] / yourself a snapper of immortal souls, / resist commodity, the *ersatz*, the cold”.

This fugitive art is a stronghold against a functionalized world. Beyond that, it also represents the possibility of a frozen instant out of time in a world where no such space is available. Mahon’s preference for the slowness of snail-mail announced at the beginning of the poem is reinforced by his criticism of other aspects of modernity.

1.2 *From resistance to denunciation*

As never so explicitly before, Mahon criticizes various aspects of contemporary society. In the collection *An Autumn Wind*, a few poems are devoted to a denunciation of the causes and consequences of the economic crisis. As Mahon puts forward a relentlessly resistant poetic front, he also points the finger at the actors and the mechanisms which might have led to the economic downfall.

In “Blueprint” (Mahon 2010, 15), he deals fairly straightforwardly with the economic crash of 2008. The poem opens on the description of the early hours of a Manhattan day, defined as “shark time in the market” for the so-called “corporate buzzards”. The first stanzas clearly blame greedy capitalism for the financial crisis and its dire consequences – the disintegration of a culture, people losing their jobs and homes:

Trucks from New Jersey (fruit and veg),
 panting beneath the window ledge
 and drowning out the twitter-cheep
 of sparrows on the fire escape,
 start up the mad Manhattan day.
 The sun, coming the other way,
 glitters on offices and planes,
 on Jeep, Dodge and commuter trains

streaming from bridge and tunnel mouth,
 from out of town, from north and south.
 At shark time in the market, though,
 some slacker on the Hudson piers
 or quiet, tree-lined avenue
 inactive at mid-morning, hears
 a different music of the spheres
 from what the corporate buzzards know.

There was a *blueprint* from the past
 but scribbled on by guilty pens
 till it was virtually effaced.
 Now, slowly running down despite
 what the best economic brains
 devise, the culture's clinging tight
 to its 'full-spectrum dominance' –
 friend and destroyer, both at once.

'Clearance Sale', 'Everything Must Go':
 with homeless folks and unemployed
 growing in number day and night,
 the gritty streets begin to look
 as they did eighty years ago
 in the old pictures;

The image of a blueprint from the past being slowly erased conveys a representation of an old order disappearing. In these first stanzas, the contrast between the hyperactivity of the market and the more tranquil rhythm of those left out of the capitalist system seems to highlight the value of a slower and more contemplative pace of life. Hence, the "inactive" "slacker"'s apathy and aimlessness are not necessarily pejorative, but seem on the contrary to allow the authentic sound of life to be heard – what Mahon calls "a different music of the spheres".

In the last stanza quoted above, Mahon draws a comparison between the current crisis and the 1929 crash. Juxtaposing different historical periods and drawing parallels in their representations, as he does with the old pictures and their similarity with the present, is one of his frequent tropes. Such oppositions, which also illustrate an aspect of his heritage from MacNeice, create a sense of history repeating itself, not of historical advance. Even in the last stanza, as a great sense of change is announced – "a leaf unfolds the rolling news / mutation writes" – it is only to go back to a simpler civilization, and the poem ends on a call to re-enchant the world: "and watch them re-enchant the world".

This poem actually functions as a blueprint for the rest of the collection. The collapse of the world's most powerful economic systems is but a sign of disenchantment and finds an echo in later poems, as for instance in "The Thunder Shower" (Mahon 2010, 18). The poem is a description of all the

noises, sounds and music created by thundery rain. As the first stanzas dwell on the varying volumes, textures and chants to be heard in the pounding rain, slowly including city noises and human voices, in stanza 6 the downpour becomes the embodiment of the economic crash, which is literally echoed in the storm: “Squalor and decadence, / the rackety global-franchise rush, / oil wars and water wars, the diatonic / crescendo of a cascading world economy / are audible in the hectic thrash / of this luxurious cadence”.

A similar parallel between a natural phenomenon such as a storm and the financial crisis is to be found in another poem with a very explicit title, “World Trade Talks” (Mahon 2010, 23). It explores the concept of growth both in economics and nature. As in previous poems and specifically in “Blueprint”, Mahon exposes here the decline and fall of financial doctrines while calling for a return to the old ways of treating the environment. The subtitle to the poem – “*Downturn Means CO2 Targets Now Achievable*” – points at the urgent need to slow down the economy if any progressive environmental changes are to be envisioned.

The poem firstly tackles the concept of the “Hindu growth rate” and takes it as a positive example. This derogatory expression refers to the low annual growth rate of the socialist economy of India before 1991 and appears in this poem as a possible way out of the destructive rush of capitalist systems. Mahon chooses to put “Hindu” in inverted commas, thus possibly emphasizing, as many political commentators have, that this slow growth rate was the result of socialist policies but had nothing to do with Hinduism. However, in “World Trade Talks” it is presented as a possible form of resistance against economic systems that encourage high growth rates at the price of environmental and social damage. The poet seems to express his own belief that a slowing down of the economy could in fact be beneficial. The expression of an opinion, even implicitly, is a rare occurrence in Mahon’s poetry. It is also striking that most poems dealing with the crisis approach it from afar, through examples in India or the USA, but rarely concentrate on Ireland. No mention is thus made of how hard the country was hit by the crisis.

Mahon seems to keep a global and somewhat distant outlook on the matter, as the poem later names major financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The second stanza is in fact a summary of the doctrines that the famous social activist Naomi Klein developed in her book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007): “The great Naomi Klein / condemns, in *The Shock Doctrine*, / the Chicago Boys, the World Bank and the IMF, / the dirty tricks and the genocidal mischief / inflicted upon the weak / who now fight back”.

Mahon recalls the Chicago Boys, a group of Chilean economists of the 1970s. Trained at the University of Chicago, some have been accused of having played an important role in the implementation of Pinochet’s dictatorship. Mahon makes in the last lines of this stanza a reference to the gist of Klein’s shock doctrine. In short, he exemplifies the idea that those who wish to implement unpopular free market policies now do so as a matter of

fact by taking advantage of certain characteristics of the aftermath of major disasters, be they economic, political, military or natural: “the dirty tricks and genocidal mischief / inflicted upon the weak”. The weak are later represented by the figure of the hare in the last two stanzas.

In the image of a hare frightened off by a combine-harvester here called a “war machine”, the animal becomes the symbol of any victim of intensive and destructive agriculture, and is given a sacred aura (“A hare in the corn / scared by the war machine / [...] / a sacred thing projected on the moon”). The last stanza also hints at a criticism of GMOs and calls for a return to more respectful ways of producing crops: “Next spring, when a new crop begins to grow, / let it not be genetically modified / but such as the ancient sowed / in the old days”. This line is a reminder of the last stanza of “Blueprint”, where the ancients had already represented a counter example to the current destruction of our environment and culture: “... and the wind sighs / secretes the ancients understood”. As the poem opened on the concept of the Hindu growth rate, it ends on a hope for a more natural growth in agriculture.

This insistence on the concept of growth finds another illustration in a poem simply entitled “Growth” (Mahon 2010, 25). In five stanzas of 6 lines each, the poet presents the coming of spring and its promise of renewal. The image of a tree is given as a symbol of persistence – “The tree stands as it always stood” – while “The global oil-price crisis bites” in the background. This short mention of the fuel crisis does not destroy the representation of an otherwise preserved world, where the threat of pollution is nonetheless mentioned: “The secret source still running clean / of brick and dust and detergent froth / that wither so much natural growth”.

2. *Ex-centric displacement*

As we have seen, resistance and persistence are the main modalities staged by Mahon to preserve and find the real while denouncing and fighting the ills of capitalism. Such denunciation is what triggers the possibility of disclosing the real. In Mahon’s poetry, resistance also means off-centre displacement and flight. Mahon is well-known for his international stance; throughout his career, the themes of dislocation and distantiation have nourished his interrogations on the concept of home and place. In recent collections since the mid-2000s, his previously detached perspective, of a poet both tourist and outsider, looking towards the island of Ireland from elsewhere, has shifted. By choosing to set his home in Country Cork, Mahon has developed in his poetry an insider’s perspective which has nonetheless remained international in scope and scale, since the poet remains an insatiable traveler. This sort of settling down in one place has also influenced his perception of place. What is particularly interesting is that in spite of having declared in some poems, as in “A Quiet Spot” from *An Autumn Wind*, that he has found “the right place” (Mahon 2010, 17), Mahon’s

poetry is still mostly concerned with marginal spaces, unmapped territories and figures of displacement and migration. We will first of all analyse his representation of movements of population and their significance in his poetry, before focusing on the ex-centric spaces he favours.

2.1 *Migration and flight*

In the poem “Resistance Days” we analyzed before, the poet’s *persona* is a seasonal migrant, all in the name of resistance and flight from corporate values associated to Christmas. These travels read as a form of necessary migration: “when I migrate / in the ‘run-up to Christmas’”; “In flight from corporate Christendom, this year / I spent the frightful season in Tangier / with spaced-out ‘fiscal nomads’ and ex-pats”. The *persona* is associated here to two other categories of migrants, those whose tourism apparently amounts to tax evasion, and the ones who have decided to leave their own country for good. Mahon’s choice of “spaced-out” to characterize them is significant. The usual meaning of this expression, which is to be euphoric or disoriented, especially from taking drugs according to the Oxford dictionary, also conveys a sense of psychological dislocation. These “spaced-out” characters are unaware of their surroundings and could in fact be anywhere. What is important here is that they are displaced, or out of place. Similarly, Mahon’s decision to add a dash in the word “ex-pats” underlines that these expatriates are ex-inhabitants of their native land. This seems to imply both that they are never to return but that they do not belong to any other place.

The type of migration that Mahon delineates here also represents a more general contemporary mode of inhabiting the world, since other types are mentioned throughout the poem. Bird migration – “for even here the birds migrate” – and human migration are juxtaposed to underline the world population movements as he pictures a group of illegal immigrants – “a lost tribe of Nigerian *sans-papiers*, / bright migrants from hot Sahara to cold EU”. By using the nearly politically incorrect word “tribe” to describe the group of illegal immigrants, Mahon implicitly hints at conflicting images of migrants arriving in the EU. Furthermore, the choice of the French word “*sans-papiers*”, which literally means “without papers”, to specify that these migrants are illegally trying to cross from Tangier to the European Union, adds both to the foreignness and the transnational nature of contemporary world population movements. As a counterpart to this portrait of present-day migration, Mahon further recalls in the following stanza relatives who, as Merchant Navy engineers, had gone to the Northern coast of Africa during the war: “I’d uncles down that way in the war years, / a whole raft of Merchant Navy engineers”. He then mentions a time of “transit visas”, thus representing a different type of temporary migration and crossing of borders.

Mahon’s interest in displaced populations also extends to the depiction of diverse types of new migrants choosing the island of Ireland as their destination.

As already mentioned, Mahon more regularly adopts Ireland and Northern Ireland as his spatial positioning than ever before in his career (but not necessarily always as his viewpoint). Such a shift in his perspective also allows him to comment fairly explicitly on some changes in the contemporary societies of both countries. These comments are generally introduced in passing, in poems with a biographical content. “Art and Reality” (Mahon 2010, 43) for example, a poem dedicated to fellow Northern Irish poet and founder of the Honest Ulsterman James Simmons (1933–2001), is a biographical homage, summarizing in 11 stanzas his life and creations. Mahon takes this opportunity to reiterate the difficulty of finding an appropriate stance, as a poet from Northern Ireland during the Troubles, before commenting on the current situation of the country. He speaks in the past, in his and Simmons’ name, to express his ambiguous feelings towards his native land: “We two / both wanted to help dissipate / the ‘guilt and infantile self-hate’, / each in his way, and find a voice / for the strange place bequeathed to us”. This presentation of Ulster as an inherited place rather than a chosen one highlights again Mahon’s tentative posture and refusal to be held as a spokesman for society as a whole. The further commentary he proposes about the contemporary situation of Northern Ireland after the advent of the Peace Process adorns the informal style of a conversation amongst friends. He talks as if he were keeping his now deceased friend up-to-date with current events:

The hard men have renounced the gun
 on *both* sides, you’d be pleased to hear.
 Two kinds of gullibles have begun,
 hundreds of years too late, to share
 the benefits; though, still unbowed,
 we get around our psychic pain
 by picking on the immigrant crowd:
 we have disgraced ourselves again.

The poet remains very skeptical about the benefits and actuality of bilateral disarmament, using italics to emphasize the word “both” in “*both sides*”. Further, he points at the persistence of violence in another realm, under the guise of racism and xenophobia turned against new immigrants. This stanza provides a quick and very ironical portrait of Northern Irish and Irish societies. According to Mahon, these may not yet have found an adequate balance in spite of the enduring ceasefire. The “immigrant crowd” as it is called here resurfaces in other poems by the recurring use of the term the “blow-ins”. This phrase, referring to newcomers or recent arrivals, can have derogatory overtones. It is firstly used between inverted commas in the poem “Insomnia” from *Life on Earth* (Mahon 2008, 22). Mahon there harps on the term and proposes some interpretations as to the origins of the woman concerned: “That woman from / the Seaview, a ‘blow-in’ / of some kind from a foreign shore,

/ seems out of her element and far from home, / the once perhaps humorous eyes grown vague out here. / What is she? A Lithuanian, or a Finn?"

The uncertainty regarding her nationality clearly underlines the diversity of incoming migrants to the island of Ireland, while also hinting at the generic categorization and stigma migrants suffer from as "foreigners". Thus, the mention of an indeterminate "foreign shore" destroys any individuality or personal data that could make her a real person rather than a mere "blow-in". In "The Seasons" from *An Autumn Wind* (Mahon 2010, 26), the blow-ins are casually mentioned in the last stanza as part of the regular inhabitants of the coast: "a yawl, Bermuda-rigged, shakes out its linen / watched by the yachties, blow-ins, quiet drunks / and the new girls with parasols in their drinks".

Between the two collections separated only by two years (2008-2010), new immigrants are no longer a source of interrogation but have become part of the normal human landscape, even if they might still be made to feel unwelcome.

2.2 *Unmapped spaces on the periphery*

The theme of dislocation also extends to Mahon's perception of space. Throughout his career, Mahon has often devoted poems to abandoned sites, no-man's-lands where life has stopped and where nature, or left-over objects and rubbish, have overtaken unwanted territories. While these spaces already propose a mapping of the periphery, of off-centre and ex-centric areas, Mahon's recent concern with migration and globalization has also triggered the apparition of new marginal spaces. We will analyse how, from abandoned locations of quiet persistence, Mahon has moved to hiding places which allow an escape from a globalized world.

In the often quoted poem "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" (Mahon 1999, 89-90), the poet begins by delineating a series of abandoned sites which can still be places of creative thinking – "Even now there are places where a thought might grow": "Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned", "Indian compounds where the wind dances / And a door bangs with diminished confidence". In the disused shed per se, which appears at the end of the first stanza, tenacious mushrooms fight for light: "And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford, / Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins / A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole".

At the end of the poem, they come to embody the unheard voices of History and its victims:

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak on their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.
Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,

'Let the god not abandon us
 Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
 We too had our lives to live.
 You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
 Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!'

The poem recalls the mushrooms' long wait for discovery and their persistence in the dark, during years of anguished solitude and abandonment. The personification of their "feverish forms" among the residues of discarded objects – "Utensils and broken pitchers" – underlines the possibility of life in places of dereliction. Throughout his collections, Mahon thus creates a cartography of cast-off territories, scattered with neglected functional items deprived of their use, but that still somehow echo with life. In poems that usually bear a clear location, such as "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" or "A Garage in Co. Cork", these sites whose former inhabitants have left are ex-centric areas on the margin of conventional life.

In "A Garage in Co. Cork", the place is thus first of all compared to "a frontier store-front in an old western" before being situated "Here in this quiet corner of Co. Cork". What the *persona* witnesses to start with is a series of aborted signs of life: "the mound / Of never-used cement", "Building materials, fruit boxes, scrap iron", "Silence of an untended kitchen garden". It resembles a fake cinema set: "Like a frontier store-front in an old western / It might have nothing behind it but thin air". A closer look discloses that the place did have a former existence: "But the cracked panes reveal a dark / Interior echoing with the cries of children", where "A family ate, slept, and watched the rain". Speculations as to their current whereabouts is later followed by conjectures regarding what the place looked like while they were still around: "Surely a whitewashed sun-trap at the back / Gave way to hens, wild thyme, and the first few / Shadowy yards of an overgrown cart track".

This abandoned garage takes in the last three stanzas of the poem an almost mythical aura. A close observation of the remains of the previous inhabitants' life conveys a sacredness to the derelict. In the sixth stanza, the way Mahon exposes the left-out functional objects in all their uselessness is almost holy: "Left to itself, the functional will cast / A death-bed glow of picturesque abandon, / The intact antiquities of the recent past, / Dropped from the retail catalogues, return / To the materials that gave rise to them / And shine with a late sacramental gleam".

Mahon's attention to discarded items is interesting here as it links them back to their original matter and the material they were derived from. They are here no longer commercial objects but rather substantial realities that exist beyond their lack of use. In later poems, and recently in *An Autumn Wind*, Mahon's interest for raw material has been renewed through ecological concerns, as he sees in waste for instance a return to a raw material that is in

fact a source of creation, as in the poem “Raw Material”: “The recycling of old shoes / as raw material / makes artwork / of the contingent real” (Mahon 2010, 69). In “A Garage in Co. Cork”, it is the real which is glimpsed in the persistence of the lifeless objects. What Mahon calls here “a picturesque abandon” is enlightening about his perception of place and his usual preference for the neglected elsewhere and deserted backyard. These places appear prominently in his poetry and define his philosophy of place. The latter is hinted at in the last stanza of “A Garage in Co. Cork”: “We might be anywhere but are in one place only, / One of the milestones of earth-residence / Unique in each particular, the thinly / Peopled hinterland serenely tense – / Not in the hope of a resplendent future / But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature”.

It appears that the concept of home, mentioned in stanza four – “Somebody somewhere thinks of this as home” – is later replaced by the idea of “earth-residence” in the last stanza of the poem. The lack of specificity of the place, “we might be anywhere”, is likewise supplanted but its inherent self-definition and uniqueness. Place thus transcends both function and time: the still visible traces of life, like passive testimonies, are not to be revived – “Not in the hope of a resplendent future”. The “recent past” of stanza six will therefore be forever lost since the place seems to have reached timelessness. In “A Garage in Co. Cork”, Mahon thus proposes a vision of an abandoned locale with mythical proportions. As he imagines a god transforming the two petrol pumps into an old man and his wife, transfigured into eternal life, the useless functionality of the pumps takes on an immaterial resonance. Mahon’s sense of place is thus both concerned with its very materiality, as shown in his interest for left-over objects and the raw material they represent, as well as with its value as an inherent elsewhere, devoid of any specificity but self-sufficient in itself.

In the poem “During the War” from *Harbour Lights* (Mahon 2005, 31-32), another representation of “picturesque abandon” is used by Mahon to enrich his vision of historical repetition and the impossibility of progress. As the title of the poem makes clear, “During the War” questions concepts of temporality and duration. By the recurring use of “as if” throughout the poem, Mahon juxtaposes different historical periods (London during the Second World War, and London at the time of the writing of the poem) which are blurred within a system of mirror-like reflections. Mahon’s poem “During the War” can be fruitfully compared to Louis MacNeice’s poem “Hiatus” (1979 [1966], 218) published in 1945. MacNeice proposes here a similar uncertain temporality: “The years that did not count – Civilians in the town / Remained at the same age as in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine, / Saying last year, meaning the last of peace”. Likewise, his use of “as if” highlights the inability of moving forward at the end of the war: “As if the weekly food queue were to stretch, / Absorb all future Europe. Or as if / The sleepers in the Tube had come from Goya’s Spain”.

In a similar vein, Mahon’s poem opens as follows: “There are those of us who say ‘during the war’ / as if the insane scramble for global power / doe-

sn't continue much as it did before". What is particularly interesting in this poem is Mahon's ability to deal with history through the representation of the persistence of waste objects. Stanzas three and four thus deliver an image of dereliction akin to that of "A Garage in Co. Cork":

... This morning in Wardour St., a skip, a tip,
a broken pipe, some unfinished repair work.
A basin of mud and junk has choked it up,
reflecting the blown sky and a baroque
cloud cinema beyond earthly intercourse:
a hole in the road where cloud-leaves gather,
each one framed for a moment in stagnant water
and trailing out of the picture in due course.

This is nothing, this is the triumph of time,
waste products mixing in the history bin,
rain ringing with a harsh, deliberate chime
on scrap iron, plastic and depleted tin,
its grim persistence from the rush-hour sky
a nuisance to the retail trade. [...]

Time has a material presence as it is thwarted by the indestructible remains of History. The image of clogged up stagnant water literally echoes a feeling of stagnation in a sense of history constantly repeating itself. Contrary to what happens in "A Garage in Co. Cork", the waste products presented here no longer have any functionality but are directly stripped back to their material nature of iron, plastic and tin, conferring to the scene a more impersonal value. Furthermore, Mahon's mention of the "retail trade", as in the "retail catalogues" of "A Garage in Co. Cork", signals his implicit criticism of a society where consumerism is the norm. The denunciation of capitalist values is explicitly put forward in the stanza that follows, where Mahon deplors the absence of dusk in areas constantly lit up by advertising: "Strip lighting writes the dusk out everywhere / on corporate space and stadium". The light effects, in the opposition between the reflections in the puddles and the final lighting up, characterize an ephemeral civilization where the passing of time is illustrated by the accumulation of rubbish. The latter's permanence turns it into the very matter of History.

2.3 "Marginal lives": between "the right place" and "hiding places"

In *An Autumn Wind* and *Harbour Lights*, Mahon's concern with place is furthermore nourished by his own finding of the "right place". This does not hinder his nonetheless relentless search for what he calls "hiding places" where it is still possible to escape the uniformity of a globalized world, and his visionary findings of places of "picturesque abandon". These three categories

of place have one common characteristic – that of being generally on the margin. In the poem “A Quiet Spot” from *An Autumn Wind* (Mahon 2010, 17), Mahon celebrates his choice to settle down in County Cork. He first of all announces his departure from city life – “We tire of cities in the end” – for reasons of pollution and unfriendliness. He then describes the area: “You always knew it would come down / to a dozy seaside town – / not really in the country, no, / but within reach of the countryside”.

This intermediary location is also later on depicted in the poem as “at the continental shelf / far from the hysteria”. Its peripheral position is ideal in Mahon’s eyes and has justified his decision to stay put after years of migratory homecomings and goings: “the perfect work-life balancing act / you’ve found after so many a fugitive year / of travel?” If the poet has found “the right place”, he is still looking out beyond its spatial limits. The last stanza thus proclaims the need to explore further, “past hedge and fencing to a clearer vision”. In other poems, this looking beyond expands into the discovery of remote “corners” which are still strongholds of authenticity.

In “The Seasons” (2010, 26) for instance, Mahon tackles first of all the disappearance of the seasons because of climate change – “What weird weather can we expect this July?” But the poem also rejoices in the ultimate advantage of the remoteness of the place: “But out here in the hot pastures of the west, / no Google goggling at our marginal lives, / there are still corners where a lark can sing”. Using a syntactic structure that recalls the first line of “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” – “there are places where a thought might grow” – Mahon stages here the persistence of areas as yet unmapped by corporate geography. These lives are “marginal” in the sense that they have escaped being standardized by an all-powerful data machine, represented here by Google maps, but also because they exist on the periphery of globalization and willfully remain on its outskirts. It is in such locations that creation can still take place, here embodied in the lark’s ability to sing. Later on in the poem, Mahon also mentions again his change of lifestyle and less frequent travelling: “If we don’t travel now we hibernate”. This corner is hence a place where one wants to stay and which is worthy of long-term tending, as the observation of the cycle of the seasons also underlines.

It seems that Mahon has thus found an example of the perfect places mentioned at the end of the poem “Resistance Days”. As we have analysed before, this poem explores through poetic means the possibility of resistance to globalization and corporate values. At the very end of this epistolary poem, as the *persona* is about to sign off, he sends his best wishes to his addressee through the conjuring up of images of ideal locales: “down silent paths, in secret hiding places, / the locked out-house that no-one notices, / listening for footfalls by a quiet river / the sun will find us when the worst is over”. The “locked out-house”, a reminder of the “Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”, is here associated also to “secret hiding places” that recall more specifically areas which manage to escape “Google goggling” for instance.

While Mahon's interest for abandoned sites has stretched his whole career, the idea of hiding seems to have developed parallel to his explicit criticism of globalization and is therefore more recent. Some poems, like "Resistance Days", associate images of places that bear both characteristics. It is also the case in the two-line poem aptly entitled "Where to Hide": "(Some derelict beach hut or abandoned wreck / as in that strange novel by Yann Queffélec.)"

Mahon's favouring of such places of dereliction extends to travel poems of fake exoticism. "Air India" from *An Autumn Wind*, is composed of four stanzas recalling a series of freeze-frame images of this contrasting country. The first stanza is exemplary of the functioning of the poem as a whole: "A haughty camel train in the rush hour, / a holy cow chewing a cardboard box, / sand-thudding fruit, a dusty star – / these are the images that recur, / and the new office blocks".

Each stanza thus proposes a juxtaposition of predominantly nominal lines giving miniature portraits of scenes of Indian life. Stanzas one, two and four are made of five lines, while stanza three contains an added fifth one which introduces a turning-point before the final image on which the poem closes. The two last stanzas appear as such:

a woodsmoke evening, the pink architecture,
moth-fluttering crowds around the sanctuary
where six-branched Shiva sits like a gilt candlestick,
some hunched-up creature watching
the sunrise from a cedar tree...
But the clearest picture

is a weed-trailing yard of wood and brick
up a dim lane behind a bicycle shop
with a quick monkey, rhesus or macaque,
clinging for dear life to a water pipe,
the slowly dripping tap.

The poem thus evolves from the recurring "images" to "the clearest picture", as if it gradually uncovered the real. The adjective "clearest" makes of this yard the poet's most vivid souvenir, while the choice of "picture" instead of "image" hints at Mahon's concept of "picturesque abandon". This back lane yard is where Mahon finds real life in a scene that is the most worthy of recollection.

3. *Alternative modes of creation*

Mahon's choice of hidden spaces to uncover and relate the real is part of a creative process based on a system of alternatives. His refusal of society's overwhelming values, such as globalization or consumerism, necessitates the search for alternative modes of creation or re-creation. Mahon's interest for off-centre spaces participates in a systematic renewal of what could be called

mainstream or what is part of the overall and generally accepted values of the world and of historical narrative. It is for that very reason that he praises France, in the poem “Resistance Days”, as an example of a country which resists the so-called “post-modern world”. If, as he states, “Still skeptical, statistically off-line France / resists the specious arguments most advance, / the digital movies and unnatural nosh”, it is in order to keep closer to the real. The use of the adjective “off-line” presumably refers to the rather low percentage of French homes connected to the internet compared to other countries, as opposed to “online”. It is also a way of highlighting France’s tendency to resist general trends and to express disbelief for modernization and change. In the following lines, Mahon emphasizes what France is resisting to and the country’s attempt to preserve a certain authenticity, through the repetition of the word “real”: “the digital movies and unnatural nosh, / to stick with real tomatoes, real *brioche* / and real stars like Adjani and Binoche”. Whether France can be considered as an example of resistance is not the point here, but such a representation of the country delineates Mahon’s belief in an “off-line”, off-centre search for alternative modes of inhabiting the world and of creating a poetry of the present.

3.1 *Centred creation*

As we have seen through several poems, Mahon is interested in marginal places and oblique perspectives. One of the very few contexts within which a sense of alignment and centredness is expressed concerns an almost magical moment of creation. The latter takes place in the poem “A Building Site” in *An Autumn Wind* (2010, 37-38), which first of all portrays the destroyed remains of an old school and convent: “Exposed dorms and corridors / squeak under the tracks / of cranes and earth-movers / and a fast shower rakes / the shattered greenhouses”.

The old buildings are to be shattered to the ground – “the site’s a *tabula rasa*. / Of the old convent nothing / remains on this dark day” – and replaced by a new housing development. The poem expresses no nostalgia and seems on the contrary to embrace this symbol of change as renewal: “perpetual change and flux / are the true element”. The poem is composed of eleven stanzas of five lines each: the first seven are devoted to the description of the destruction in process, while the last four deal with the great sense of creative drive the site has become open to. It is worth quoting these four last stanzas in their entirety:

opens a special place,
a field of rough energy
suspended for a minute
not at an ‘interface’
or even a ‘cutting edge’

but at a spinning centre
of heightened consciousness,

gives giddy glimpses into
the universe of blown
dust and distant stars.

This is the great answer
granted at a glance
and rained upon at once,
the magic coalition
of concrete circumstance –

a momentary, oblique
vision of an unknown
eternal dispensation,
the infinite republic
of primary creation.

The shortness of each line heightens the feeling of trepidation suggested by this sudden outburst of energy. Instead of being a scene of desolation, the “deconstruction” of the convent becomes the epitome of a new order replacing the old and is a sign of hope. A residue of the former religious building’s spirituality seems to be glimpsed in “the magic coalition / of concrete circumstance” as well as in the boundless timelessness of creation. This ultimate moment of creation is embodied in both space and time, with the words “special place”, “field” and “suspended for a minute”.

The image of the “spinning centre / of heightened consciousness” recalls both Joyce’s epiphany and a variation on a Yeatsian gyre. It is interesting that Mahon highlights this idea of a “spinning centre” by refusing other expressions inserted in the poem between inverted commas – “interface” and “cutting edge”. The quality of being in the centre, and not on the brink or in-between is essential to the emergence of creative forces. Furthermore, this instant of renewal is somewhat akin to a cosmogony, with the mention of the “universe of blown / dust and distant stars”. The poem stages a rare moment when ex-centric resistance is put aside to participate in the centred concentration of renewal forces. The “magic coalition” exposed here is glimpsed again in other poems which exhibit a peripheral positioning, notably in the exploration of alternative ways of encountering the real.

3.2 *Choosing alternatives*

It is notably the case throughout *Harbour Lights* and *An Autumn Wind* where Mahon exposes alternative ways of approaching the real, in order to go beyond its artificiality and to find its inherent magic. In Mahon’s vision, this is only possible through a complete refusal of corporate society’s ideals. In the poem “Harbour Lights” (2005, 61-67), Mahon makes clear that the moment of

creation, what is in the poem called “the first whisper of art” and its magic can only happen on the margin of mainstream culture: “Magic survives only where blind profit, / so quick on the uptake, takes no notice of it / for ours is a crude culture dazed with money, / a flighty future that would ditch its granny”.

At the end of “Resistance Days”, Mahon had announced his poetic programme: “my own New Year resolution / is to study weather, clouds and their formation”. In “Harbour Lights”, this same idea becomes a necessary alternative to a marketed world: “I toy with cloud thoughts as an alternative / to the global shit-storm that we know and love”. Such an enterprise entails a return to ancient values of time, and to places where the darkness of night is not polluted by artificial lights. This is what Mahon means when he mentions “the re-enchantment of the sky” and “the archaic night” in “Harbour Lights”. Time also has to be given a different value to allow the emergence of thought, as one reads in “Lapis Lazuli” (2005, 24-25): “when slow thought replaces the money-shower”. The denunciation of corporate values provokes an onset of nostalgia that appears in certain poems, as in “Harbour Lights”: “I claim the now disgraceful privilege / of living part-time in a subversive past”.

Contemporary society’s values have therefore to be escaped and put aside to let creation happen. One alternative encapsulates cloud observation as an epitome of slow thought and an extension to Mahon’s career-long devotion to the observation of the minute details of the visible. Another means of fighting against certain inconsistencies of the present is for Mahon to re-explore the past. Alternative creation modalities and temporalities have long been part of Mahon’s poetic stance, in recent collections they allow him to resist to the rather disappointing aspects of the present.

3.3 *Fictional alternatives*

The elaboration of alternatives also extends to Mahon’s rewritings of canonical episodes from the classical heritage. In the poem “Calypso” from *Harbour Lights* (2005, 57-60), he proposes another perspective on Homer’s epic tale. Such a fictional alternative is, as we shall see, likewise triggered by the willingness to avoid another of humanity’s evils, warfare.

In “Calypso” Mahon proposes a different version of the episode of books I and V of the *Odyssey* where the nymph keeps Ulysses hostage on her island so she could make him her immortal husband. In Mahon’s poem, Calypso’s first motivation is to temporarily divert the Homeric hero from his destiny: “Gaily distracting him from his chief design / she welcomed him with open arms and thighs, / teaching alternatives to war and power”. Little by little, Ulysses loses all desire to go back to war: “He prayed for an end to these moronic wars” and slowly aspires to a peaceful life:

He spent his days there in perpetual summer.
 Stuck in a rock-cleft like a beachcomber
 washed up, high and dry amid luminous spray,
 intent on pond life, wildflowers and wind-play,
 the immense significance of a skittering ant,
 a dolphin-leap or a plunging cormorant,
 he learned to live at peace with violent nature,
 calm under the skies' grumbling cloud-furniture
 and bored by practical tackle, iron and grease –
 an ex-king and the first philosopher in Greece.

From an epic hero whose fate requires action, Ulysses has turned into a philosopher who enjoys nothing better than the peaceful contemplation of nature. Mahon ironically underlines the difference in scale between the minute details discovered in an intent observation of nature – “the immense significance of a skittering ant” – and the grandeur of the epic sweep. Ulysses' heroism is thus played down, as exemplified by his attraction to the tiny instead of to the grandiose. Mahon hence proposes a different reading of the overall structure of the Homeric plot. In his version, the belligerent values associated to masculine protagonists no longer occupy the foreground of the narrative, as it rather explores the pacifying role of women. In Louis MacNeice's poem “The Island” (1979 [1966], 304-308), which also deals with Ulysses' forced stay on Calypso's island, the episode similarly represents a moment of peace and reprieve for the hero: “Here, he feels, is peace”. Nevertheless, the belligerent epic ideal is still to be found, contrary to what happens in Mahon's version. In MacNeice's lines, nostalgia for the battle field is clearly felt: “Polishing cone-studs as in Homeric / Times when he braced the boss on the shield / Of some rough-hewn hero under the cypresses / And held out fame in the field”.

In Mahon's version, the hero has a completely different agenda. In the final stanza, Mahon suggests an alternative ending to Ulysses' forced stay on Calypso's island. In his poem, the hero decides to remain with the nymph and not to go back to Ithaca, in order to avoid participating to new conflicts:

Bemused with his straw hat and driftwood stick,
 unmoved by the new wars and the new ships,
 he died there, fame and vigour in eclipse,
 listening to voices echo, decks and crates
 creak in the harbour like tectonic plates –
 or was he sharp still in his blithe disgrace,
 deliberate pilot of his own foggy shipwreck?
 Homer was wrong, he never made it back; or,
 if he did, spent many a curious night hour
 still questioning that strange, oracular face.

This change of perspective is triggered by feminine figures, who embody alternative lifestyles to constant warfare in classical epics. In “Calypso”, Mahon reinforces the central role played by women in the *Odyssey*, and emphasizes more particularly their influence on the narrative structure of the poem:

Homer was right though about the important thing,
 the redemptive power of women; for this narrative,
 unlike the blinding shields, is womanly stuff.
 The witch bewitches, the owl-winged sisters sing,
 some kind girl takes charge within the shadow
 of a calm glade where the sea finds a meadow;
 much-sought Penelope in her new resolute life
 has wasted no time acting the stricken widow
 and even the face that sank the final skiff
 knows more than beauty; beauty is not enough.

Beyond the archetypal battlefield scenes, women shape the plot through their pacifying power. In “Calypso” the promise of eternal glory which motivates the hero to achieve brave acts on the battlefield is replaced by a desire to enjoy a peaceful present. The glorious immortality achieved by untimely death is no longer hoped for, and the protagonist wishes to grow old in the quietness of home. Such a rewriting of this epic episode sheds new light on the concept of heroism. It seems that what Mahon proposes here as a poetic programme relies on the reconsideration of the classical model of courage. The extreme violence that forms the basis of such bravery is refused by Mahon as an ideal of heroism. In his version of the classical plot, the hero is the one who prefers staying on the sidelines away from bloody conflicts. The writing of such a version, as fictional as it may be, nevertheless expresses a deep-rooted belief in the value of peaceful alternatives both in the mythological world of the *Odyssey* and in the reality of today’s society. The example of this last alternative is therefore inherently part of Mahon’s programme of “re-enchantment”. By proposing an oblique re-reading of this Homeric episode, he explores poetry’s ability to reshape and re-visualize reality and fiction.

Ex-centricity, resistance and the envisioning of alternatives thus form the core of Mahon’s latest collections. These central themes enrich Mahon’s work on time and space. Ex-centric temporality and spatiality appear in many poems; when the real is perceived in a moment out of time and chronology, as in the art of photography and its freeze-framing power exemplified in “Resistance Days”, or in the moment of creation experienced in “A Building Site”. Mahon encourages any slowing down of time, as a resistance to modernity in his preferred use of “snail-mail”, but also as an avoidance of the constant simultaneity of the connected universe, as he expresses in “High Water” (2005, 23), where the *personae* of the poem are “in flight / from the

'totality and simultaneity' of data". He also disapproves of what he refers to in inverted commas as the "knowledge era", where, as he writes in the poem "Harbour Lights", "everything is noticed, everything known". Resistance is thus also aimed at modern technology and the fake instantaneity it triggers, with many poems shaping a time and space away from such media invasion. An interest in a slow pace that could counteract the steadfast run of capitalism towards its own ruin is also repeatedly alluded to. For Mahon, allowing time for contemplation is a necessary alternative, as the observation of clouds as a poetic programme testifies. Likewise, Mahon's poems on growth, both economic and natural, insist on the value of slow growth, as a way of persistence on the periphery, instead of participating to the growth race at all costs. This persistence is illustrated in the representation of discarded objects in places where time has stopped. They embody timelessness and a new sense of place in the face of fast consumerism and convey a reflection on the concept of the marginal picturesque.

Attempts at slowing down time also bring about nostalgia in certain poems, as if imagining an alternative version of the present, in order to offset the excesses of modernity, could eventually consist in returning to previous times. This is particularly striking in poems dealing with environmental questions, as in "World Trade Talks" where "the old days" are taken as a model, or in "Blueprint" where Mahon refers to the "ancients" and their knowledge of nature. Nostalgia here functions as a refusal to envision a future that could be a worse replica of the present. Mahon's recent collections, with their explicit voicing of opinions, offer a new outlook on the world at large and the island of Ireland in particular. Interestingly, world changes such as the economic crisis or the impending urgency of global warming are dealt with in Mahon's poetry in a way that reinforces his pre-existing leitmotifs. It is as if his poetic trajectory, for its own survival and renewal, could not but embrace these topical concerns. Following such a direction allows Mahon to propose a poetry to the present that is ever relevant to its times.

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