

**Transforming Texts: Adaptation and Ekphrasis in the  
poetry of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon.**

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## Abstract

This thesis will explore the historical inheritance and use of adaptation and ekphrasis in the poetry of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon. Both poets include other texts in their work to perpetuate dialogues on history, aesthetics and poetic form, using images, symbols and formal structures to question what poetry can or should do. Looking at the revisionary power of language this thesis will turn to examples of adaptation and revision in the work of each poet. In the poetry of Mahon, it will show how ekphrasis engages with questions of history and aesthetics through the relationship between visual and verbal forms. The result is a poetry that develops temporal and spatial qualities connected to the poet's sense of self and to his philosophical and intellectual concerns for poetry. In his later collections, ekphrasis contributes to Mahon's metaphysical landscapes as they resist the symbolic or unified vision of cultural archetypes to focus on the 'harsh realities' of a contemporary world at war. In the poetry of Muldoon, the visual and verbal components of language develop a conscious boundary between the image and the ideological and historical dialogues that surround it. Muldoon develops stories out of objects that establish a dialogue on the formal qualities of language and of the poet's relation to it. His poetry self-consciously engages with the structural and conceptual problems of representation, adapting the ideas of philosophers, writers and poets to develop a poetry that expresses what it cannot state. His resistant form demonstrates a responsibility to both himself and the present time in which he is writing.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used for books written by Derek Mahon:

A	Antarctica (1985)
CD	Courtyards in Delft (1981)
CP	Collected Poems (1999)
HBN	The Hunt by Night (1982)
HL	Harbour Lights (2005)
J	Journalism: Selected Prose
P	Poems 1962-1978 (1979)
SP	Selected Poems (1991)
Ad	Adaptations (2006)
NSP	New Selected Poems (2011)

The following abbreviations have been used for book written by Paul Muldoon:

NW	New Weather (1973)
M	Mules (1977)
WBL	Why Brownlee Left (1980)
Q	Quoof (1983)
MTB	Meeting the British (1987)
Ma	Madoc (1990)
AC	The Annals of Chile (1994)
H	Hay (1998)
TII	To Ireland, I (2000)
P	Poems: 1968-1998 (2001)
MSG	Moy Sand and Gravel (2002)
HoL	Horse Latitudes (2006)
EOP	The End of the Poem (2006)

# 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the use of adaptation and ekphrasis in the poetry of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon. It looks in particular at the way in which these poets borrow, adapt and transform the work of past writers and artists to develop their own poetic. Even in the early works of both poets, the extent to which they rely on a wide variety of intertextual forms establishes the presence of the past as a central aspect of their poetic. *Nightcrossing*, published in 1968 was to be the first in a long line of publications in which Mahon explored various forms of intertextuality; allusion, quotation, adaptation, ekphrasis, revision. In addition to the diverse range of intertextual material in his collections he is a seasoned translator as his 2006 publication, *Adaptations* demonstrates, with translations of Ovid, Sophocles, Pasolini, Valéry, Jaccottet and Baudelaire, to name but a few of those covered within the collection.

Whilst intertextuality may be an intrinsic part of his poetry it is also inherently problematic, bringing with it the unavoidable question of why he relies so extensively on external texts, what they contribute to his poetry and how they can be understood in light of his tireless propensity to revise his own work. Mahon's revisions and adaptations move beyond the repetition of a past form to include extensive revisions of his own poems. These are frequently re-named between collections, either by means of an entirely new title or a protraction of the original. In addition to revisions of this nature, Mahon has been known to remove poems completely from his body of work. His *Collected Poems* and more recently his *New Collected Poems* have seen the disappearance of a number of poems. In addition, individual poems are displaced in both his *Collected* and *New Collected* either through a change to where they appear or through a revision of their title or content. In many cases individual poems appear amongst earlier poems, rather than adhering to the collection in which they first arise. Furthermore, revisions of poems often include amended titles, some of which are protracted versions of the original, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' has become 'Carrowdore' for example, whilst some are given entirely new titles, as is the case with 'Shorelines' in *Harbour Lights* which has become 'Sand Studies' in Mahon's

*New Collected Poems*. When approaching Mahon's poetry then it is equally important to understand his use of intertextuality in light not only of his literary borrowing from others, but in the self-conscious revisions of his own past.

Muldoon's use of intertextuality is equally extensive. His poetry and his prose incorporate a wide range of intertextual material, exhibiting a sustained interest in allusion, adaptation, revision and translation. Quoting T.S. Eliot's 'mediocre artist borrow, great artists steal' in a 1994 interview he goes on to note that 'works of art...come from context' adding 'I think that what Bloom said about the anxiety of influence makes sense. That said, so what?'<sup>1</sup> 'So what' has become a returning question for critics engaging with Muldoon's work in recent years who have similarly questioned the status of intertextuality in his work. Beset by past allusions, the interaction between poet and text, text and the world is frequently complicated by a shift of voice and allusion from one time or poet, to the next. Consequently, critics well acquainted with Muldoon have argued for a critical approach to his work that 'put[s] aside' the 'less important aspects of meaning' in order to understand how Muldoon's poetry works.<sup>2</sup> Peter McDonald's viewpoint appears in the introduction to a 1998 edition of critical essays on Muldoon. In approach, he places emphasis on the interaction between the semantic and syntactic interplay of Muldoon's poetic, arguing that in the case of Muldoon, 'what a poem can tell us is not separable from how it tells us what it does'.<sup>3</sup> The selection of essays that follow McDonald's assertion support an approach to Muldoon that looks closely at the 'how' through close attention to the frustrating forms of Muldoon's poems. How then, are the many and varied forms of intertextuality to be understood in the work of both poets?

One consideration is the significant developments in literary criticism during the latter half of the twentieth century. The proliferation of new critical

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Contemporary Literature*, XXXVI (1994), 1-29. p.16.

<sup>2</sup> *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004). p.4. McDonald's introduction to the selection of essays argues for an approach that looks beyond 'meaning' to focus on 'the bracing and perplexing realities of 'concentration''.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

perspectives from the late 1960's onwards occurred a time at when both poets were still shaping their poetic identities. Mahon had left Trinity in 1965 and subsequently spent several years in Canada and America, undertaking a succession of temporary positions whilst expanding his knowledge of American poets. His poetry shows a developing interest in the work of the 'new critics' approach to literature following his time in America. From his early collections he plays with formalist ideas, incorporating these into his poems to generate dialogues on form. Muldoon by contrast, was only 18 at the time of 'troubles' and only two years off the publication of his first pamphlet, *Knowing My Place*, which was closely followed by his first collection *New Weather* in 1973.

Throughout this time, literary criticism at home and abroad met with a proliferation of new critical perspectives, most notably the birth of the term 'intertextuality' in 1969 and the publication of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* in 1973. As a result the theoretical basis of interpretation became increasingly complex as new theories of textual analysis made the possibility of ascertaining 'meaning' from a text appear not only impractical but immaterial. Since the inception of the term by Julia Kristeva in her 1969 publication *Séméiotiké* it has served as a base-line for a theoretical understanding of 'intertextuality' and it continues to impact upon the way critics look at and interpret texts<sup>4</sup>. Rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's principle of dialogism, Kristeva's theory suggests that all utterances are subject to interplay of meaning, even where the reader is presented with the appearance of a unified authorial voice, as in monologues, narrative fiction or poetry.<sup>5</sup> For Bakhtin, the partially or unsaid dialogue present in situations such as these are equally relevant and have implications for the reader. Kristeva applies Bakhtin's theory to demonstrate how language acts as a dynamic surface, reflecting these various elements through the play and exchange of literary structures:

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<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Séméiotiké: Recherches Pour Une Sémalyse* (Paris: Points Press, 1969). All quotations from Kristeva's work are taken from Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992).

...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity and language is read as at least *double*.<sup>6</sup>

Kristeva goes on to describe intertextuality as a 'permutation of texts', suggesting that all texts allow an exchange or levelling of 'meaning' rather than resisting the 'neutralisation' that results as one text intercepts another. Her ideas revolutionised the way texts were critically analysed from that point onwards. Whilst neither Muldoon nor Mahon advocate any established theoretical or critical position in their work, the impact of Kristeva's work and the recognition of a dialogic text is visible in the work of both poets. Mahon's 1997 publication, *The Yellow Book* refers directly to Bakhtin and the 'forest of intertextuality' as does Muldoon's 1990 collection, *Madoc*. Muldoon's own prose works on intertextuality also suggest a doubling of language, of 'two texts' and of the importance of intertextuality to the historical development of the Irish imagination.<sup>7</sup>

The advances made by Kristeva and Bakhtin were not the only major critical work to appear in the second half of the twentieth century. They were closely followed by Harold Bloom's seminal work *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>8</sup> Bloom offered a theory of poetic influence and of 'intra-poetic relationships' that claimed to advance a historical understanding of influence.<sup>9</sup> 'Influence', he claims, 'is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships-imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological-all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and is the central point of this book) is that anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading'.<sup>10</sup> In Bloom's theory, every act of writing is a misreading of a previous writing. His theory has received a mixed reception, a point he notes in the preface to his 1997 reproduction, stating

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin. p.37.

<sup>7</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.24.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.xxiii.

that 'for more than twenty years I have been bemused by the book's reception, which remains ambivalent'.<sup>11</sup>

Such ambivalence following the inception of these theories led to an uncertain landscape, for critics and artists. As mentioned above, Bloom's theory has been acknowledged by Muldoon, but it has also been applied by critics to the work of Irish poets to connect one poet with another and to suggest a poet's adoption of a particular critical approach. Neil Corcoran 1999 publication for example, paid particular attention to Seamus Heaney's influence on Paul Muldoon.<sup>12</sup> His essay, 'Heaney versus Muldoon' advances his own theories of intertextuality through the use of Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', suggesting that Muldoon responds to Heaney through coded allusions in his poems that connect back to Bloom's theory. Hence throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, both the theories and the application of these theories to Irish poetry began to establish and perpetuate dialogues on the function of intertextuality within the work of these poets, its problems and practices.

Most importantly, Corcoran's theory suggests that poets are responding to advances in literary theory through their poetry. This is the case in the work of both Muldoon and Mahon. Their poetry frequently raises questions of the formal qualities of language, connecting consciously with advances in literary theory. They have both demonstrated an interest in criticism: whether the considerable attention Muldoon has given to intertextuality or Mahon's occasional reviews and articles. In addition to their prose pieces, Muldoon has taken up several academic posts and is currently a Professor of Creative Writing at Princeton University. Mahon, whilst not engaging in academic life, has taken a creative writing post at the University of Coleraine (1977-79) and continued to write short pieces for journals throughout his career. Through their prose works both poets refer to literary, historical and philosophical concepts of language and to how this hinders or helps the poet or the reader. Viewing their work then, requires an awareness of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.xi.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999). In particular, Corcoran turns to Harold Bloom and *The Anxiety of Influence*, pointing out that both Heaney and Muldoon have 'known the theory as long as it has been around'. p.130.

how these ideas are being self-consciously applied and what effect the presence of a dialogue on form has on other elements of the poem, such as the social and cultural relation of poet to poem.

This leads to a further important consideration: the outbreak of the ‘troubles’ in 1969, which led to over thirty years of sectarian conflict and uncertainty. Critical responses to the work of Mahon and Muldoon have overwhelmingly applied the presence of intertextuality to the historical and ideological circumstances in which they were both writing, whether arguing that it has distanced them from the cultural and political events of civil conflict, or suggesting that it provided new ways of engaging with it. Edna Longley’s 1986 publication *Poetry in the Wars* explored the relationship between poetry and the civil and critical unrest that faced modern poetry from 1910 onwards. Announcing her thematic focus for the collection of essays to follow she discusses the convergence of two themes, ‘poetry’s relation to public conflicts of the last seventy-five years and the conflict between ‘Traditionalism’ and ‘Modernism’.<sup>13</sup>

Longley’s publication appeared shortly after the disturbing events of the Long Kesh hunger strikers in Northern Ireland. Her collection of essays, whilst acknowledging the dangers of a ‘cause and effect’ approach to modern and contemporary poetry, inevitably connects poetry with war in a way that incorporates not only the dangers of only seeing the political dimension of poetry written during difficult times, but of another war, that of a critical and theoretical ‘war’ between traditional and modernist aesthetics and the impact this had already exerted on poetry post 1910. Her essays on Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon draw attention to the use of historical form as a means of engaging with the social and political life of Ireland, discussing the ‘musical shape’ of Mahon’s poetic and the ‘Varieties of Parable’ in Muldoon’s as ways in which both poets responded to the pressures of writing during a time of conflict. Of particular interest in Longley’s discussion of both poets is their return to form. Her essays touch upon a central aspect of their work, that of the adaptation and revision of past forms as a means of responding to and engaging questions of the ‘place’ of the self in a community in conflict.

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<sup>13</sup> Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986). p.9.

Longley's approach owes a considerable amount to the influence of Louis MacNeice.<sup>14</sup> Her essay on Mahon touches on the 'centrality of MacNeice', with particular regard to the formal qualities of Mahon's poetry. She comments on how 'nearly all of Mahon's poetry, wears form new', continuing in her discussion of him to assert the connection between the use and 'search for form' as a reaction to contemporary pressures. In the poetry of Muldoon, this influence becomes one that is primarily driven by parable writing. Defining the term 'parable' in his introduction to *The Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice refers to the Oxford English Dictionary entry as, 'any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else'.<sup>15</sup> MacNeice states in his introduction that he is particularly interested in the 'kind of parable' that 'on the surface may not look like a parable at all', but that 'is a kind of double-level writing, or ... sleight of hand'.<sup>16</sup> In particular he discusses the tendency of parable writers to use 'special-worlds', allegorical and emblematic use of characters and voices; the use of 'dreams' and 'fairy stories', 'Everyman' characters and mythology. This 'double-level writing', as MacNeice comments is concerned 'not only with content but with form'.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, Longley's collection foregrounds the importance of a poetry that is developing as a self-conscious response to place, but one that also acts as a resistance to it through the sustained presence of a dialogue on form.

Issues of how Irish poets were responding to cultural and critical unrest continued to engage critical theory throughout the 1990's, with Corcoran's monograph *Poets of Modern Ireland* one of a number of articles or books that examined the extensive use of intertextuality in the work of poets past and present. Writing in 1992, Shane Murphy stated that 'poets now write from within other texts', which he claimed had resulted in the proliferation of 'texts that exist as bricolages of quotations' allowing a subtler, and in many ways a more problematic approach to issues of influence, intertextuality and interpretation.

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<sup>14</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.2-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

Murphy cites several instances where ‘coded’ references occur in contemporary Irish poetry, providing examples from Muldoon, Paulin, Heaney and McGuckian to emphasize the extent and diversity of textual referencing amongst these poets. He looked in particular at how Irish poets were returning to traditional images and forms to develop new ways of engaging with their situation.<sup>18</sup> One example given by Murphy is the presence of the ‘Salvador’ section in Muldoon’s ‘7 Middagh Street’, in which he claims Muldoon is able to relive ‘Dali’s inner struggle concerning art’s social role’ through several references to Dali’s own works. Set amongst the backdrop of Dali’s art, Murphy cites Salvador’s comment, ‘Which side was I on/Not one, or both or none’, as evidence of Dali’s, and hence Muldoon’s, engagement with politics, claiming that ‘indirectness and a lack of closure are not synonymous with non-engagement’.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst ‘not synonymous with non-engagement’ critical response to the presence of intertextuality is here and elsewhere instilled with a politics of place, more specifically a place that exists elsewhere. Many of the poets from Northern Ireland were looking to figures from outside their cultural and physical boundaries as a source of inspiration for a poetic revival that drew comparatively on the lives of other writers and figures, particularly those who had endured the realities of conflict, exile or suppression. Amongst them the Roman poet, Ovid, became a recurring figure as noted by John Kerrigan’s ‘Ulsters Ovids’.<sup>20</sup> Kerrigan’s essay concentrates solely on the extensive appearance of Ovid in the work of these poets, both as a figure of exile and estrangement and for the impact of Ovid’s

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<sup>18</sup> Shane Murphy, ‘A Code of Images: Northern Irish Centos’, *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (2002), 193-203. Murphy offers some useful insights into the ‘coded’ images of contemporary Irish poetry, but his suggestion that they ‘write from within other texts’ and in particular that Northern Irish centos exist as ‘a bricolage of quotations’ raise questions about the type of connectivity Murphy is suggesting to be applicable to all Northern Irish poets discussed. Whilst McGuckian could be seen as a ‘bricoleur’, this is not necessarily an appropriate term for poets such as Muldoon and Mahon. The term suggests a random, haphazard use of quotation and allusion that is at variance with his examination of the centos. Despite this, Murphy offers some useful insights into contemporary Irish poetry.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.195.

<sup>20</sup> John Kerrigan, ‘Ulster Ovids’, in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), pp. 237-269.

*Metamorphoses* on the Irish writer.<sup>21</sup> Kerrigan took as his focus the imaginative afterlife of the exiled Roman poet and his works as they fed into the cultural and religious consciousness of the Irish poet. His article was significant for the understanding it advanced of a colonial consciousness that responded to the loss of a Latin education as yet another form of exile from a religious and cultural centre.

Central to Kerrigan's discussion was the Modernists' revival of Ovid and the subsequent impact this had on Modernist writers, claiming that they were increasingly aware of the 'mythic fragments that made up their culture – encyclopaedic remnants of what might have once compelled belief'.<sup>22</sup> The impact for the contemporary Ulster writer was a clear distinction in the type of poetry produced, which he claimed depended on the theological background of the writer. Intertextuality here takes on the added complexity of a contrast in perspective that establishes itself out of a common ground. Muldoon an Ulster Catholic and Mahon, an Ulster protestant, whilst from the same province, develop a poetry that is different in cause and effect, their work contributing and responding to their sense of place through a diverse use of language that pictures 'place' and their exile from it. This is evident in the narrative ventriloquism of Muldoon's poetry and the dramatic dialogues of Mahon. Both poets inhabit space, but they do so differently. The recurrent use of Ovid in their work offers a common ground on which to view these differences and how they continue to inflect the poetry of both. This is the focus of Chapter Two, which establishes Ovid as a central figure of the thematic sense of exile that permeates their poetry. The Roman poet appears as a historical figure but also as a figurative afterlife that establishes itself as a recurrent form that reflects aspects of the poet's self. Returning to the myth of Tithonus a character who first appears in Ovid's *Amores*, Chapter Two will show how both poets have engaged with the myth to develop poems of the isolated and displaced self.

As Chapter Two will demonstrate, the influence of Ovid extends not only to the man but also to his work. One central and recurring aspect of Ovid in the

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<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Kerrigan, p.242.

work of both poets is the relationship between the verbal and the visual dynamics of language. Ekphrasis, the ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’ is an established genre, with a long history of use, from the works of Homer to Keats, Yeats and that of more recent poets, including Mahon and Muldoon.<sup>23</sup> Instances of ekphrasis saw a significant increase following the impact of Imagism at the turn of the twentieth century. The effect of these historical developments are evident in the poetry of contemporary Irish poets, both in the traditional sense of a ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’ and more broadly through the repeated use of the image as a central and formal component in their poetry.<sup>24</sup> Chapter three will look at instances of ekphrasis and revision in Mahon’s work to show how Mahon engages with aspects of time and space as integral components of memory and the developing self, but it will also concentrate on what happens when this self is revised in subsequent versions of his ekphrastic poems. Visual form is a recurring element of Mahon’s poetic. It is central to his poetry and to his understanding of how the self interprets and is interpreted by the world. The examples in Chapter Two will look in particular at the use of ekphrasis in his 1982 collection, *The Hunt by Night*, before moving on to consider the historical development of ekphrasis in his work. His interest in ekphrasis, as will be seen, lays the foundations for a poetic career that repeats and returns to historical dialogues on form to generate new ways of seeing and ‘being’ that exist beyond the parameters of critical response or historical determinism.

Mahon’s continuing interest in the relationship between the visual and the verbal aspects of language will then be explored through a closer look at his 2005 collection, *Harbour Lights*. This collection develops many of the formal and thematic elements of Mahon’s earlier collections. Written at the time of the Iraq war, it returns to issues of place and displacement, self and other through the contemporary lens of photography, bringing to his text a ‘new’ form of ekphrasis

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<sup>23</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.3.

<sup>24</sup> Edna Longley discusses the presence of ekphrasis in the work of Irish poetry in light of the Modernist and Imagist’s movement away from speech and movement to the spatial qualities of painting. See Edna Longley, ‘No More Poems About Paintings’, in *Irish Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Kenneally (Buckingham: Colin Smythe, 1992), pp. 90-111.

that poses more complex questions of representation. Again these return to questions of art and how the self is able to find expression through it.

In particular, Mahon focuses on the artist in wartime. He returns to the work of W. B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bowen and Paul Valéry as examples of past writers who have engaged with the uncertainties and anxieties of their present through their poetry. Similarly, Mahon responds to his own concerns through his poetry. The proliferation of women that inhabit *Harbour Lights* offers an example of this as the poet responds to culturally charged images and symbols through the transformation of them into the real, imagined and numinous landscapes of the poetic imagination.

This chapter also shows Mahon's resistance to finality, whether of vision or voice, through the fluid returns and repetitions of image and sound throughout the collection. His poetry resists fixity, choosing instead to form and transform the self and to find a 'place' in which it continues outside the boundaries of the poem. This is evident in his final image in 'Harbour Lights' to 'find the right place, find it and live for ever...?' or the final line of 'The Seaside Cemetery' in which the poem ends on a 'shifting surface'.<sup>25</sup> Both these poems generate the paradox of not ending, of not reaching the stillness of voice or vision in the final lines. This is most clearly seen in his 2007 poem 'Somewhere the wave', a short poem that anticipates rather than ends, leaving the reader with the prophetic turning of a wave:

a voice, not quite a voice, in the sea distance  
 listening to its own thin cetaceous whistle,  
 sea music gasp and sigh, slow wash and rustle.  
 Somewhere the wave is forming which in time... [SW]

This refusal to end, to fix on any one perspective is at the heart of Mahon's poetry. The expanse of time and space beyond the real time of the poem continues as a source of renewal and an acknowledgement that revision is an integral component of the poetic imagination.

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<sup>25</sup> Mahon, *Harbour Lights*, (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2007), 'Harbour Lights', p.67 and 'The Seaside Cemetery', p.75.

Muldoon does not develop an ekphrastic poetry through the verbal representation of known works of art to the extent seen in Mahon, but his poetry does rely on a distinctly visual dimension and as with ekphrasis, draws analogies from the relation between the visual and the verbal components of language. This is evident in his explanation of intertextuality in which he relates the 'cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible' qualities of poetry to Amergin's 'tireless reinvention of himself as stag or flood or wind or tear or hawk'.<sup>26</sup> The qualities of language develop associations between the verbal and the visual elements of his poetry, which as will be seen, generate patterns of engagement from the political dialogues that surround it.

Overwhelmingly, the relationship between the visual and the verbal limits of language connect to another concern in the poetry of Mahon and Muldoon, that of the 'end' of a poem. The 'end' of the poem is a philosophical and conceptual problem that persists in the work of both poets. Interviewed in 1991, Derek Mahon responded to a question on the new *Selected Poems*, released that year by commenting that the collection was 'a tombstone' continuing, 'buy it, by all means and complain about the finicky revisions and re-revisions, but don't imagine that this is the whole story. Valéry said that a poem is never finished, only abandoned; and there is more where that came from'.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Muldoon's Oxford Lectures on Poetry, delivered between 1999 - 2004 and published in 2006 in *The End of the Poem*, question the many difficulties posed by the idea of the 'end of a poem'. His lectures question what happens when a poet adds substantially to an original work, he discusses issues connected to translation, he explores the end of the poem in terms of 'depth' rather than duration and how recurrent imagery manages the transition between internal and external spaces. Common to all the lectures is the fluidity of boundaries between one poet, one time and the next as individual poems are brought together in a collection that for the large part expose the fallacy of 'endings' by exposing a 'community' of intertext.

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<sup>26</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> William Scammell, 'Derek Mahon Interviewed', *Poetry Review*, 81 (1991), 4-6. p.6.

For Muldoon this sense of connectivity merges one poet with another. In *To Ireland, I*, he charts a path through Irish literature, starting with the first poet of Ireland, Amergin, who is 'crucial to any understanding of the role of the Irish writer as it has evolved over the centuries'.<sup>28</sup> As previously mentioned, it begins with Amergin's alphabet poem from which Muldoon demonstrates a continuity through Irish writers that culminates in Robert Graves's idea of the inclination towards the 'esoteric', where the break with form leads to the encrypted and 'virtually unintelligible'.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, Muldoon's acts of verbal contortion forge a historical presence and demonstrate continuity in Irish literature based on the transformative powers of language. This is clear in the closing paragraph of 'Wonderbirth' following Muldoon's exploration of Elizabeth Bowen:

Joyce belongs in Bowen, Bowen, Allingham, and those anonymous ninth-century Irish poets in Beckett. All, indeed, are anonymous. Their very disregard for their 'selves' allows them to mutate and transmogrify themselves, to position themselves, with Amergin, at some notional cutting edge'<sup>30</sup>

In charting a path through Irish writers, he establishes a complex form of intertextuality that depends upon an awareness of the recurring words, phrases and sounds that allow writers to signify the presence of a predecessor without overtly referring to them. In both his prose and his poetry this raises important questions about forms of survival and intertextuality amongst Irish writers.

Chapter Five will look at Muldoon's claims for intertextuality in light of his own comments. It will show how he develops poems that self-consciously question issues of responsibility through the formal techniques he adopts in his poetry and his prose. It will also focus on his use of intertextuality to develop questions of form. Muldoon consciously alludes to literary, historical and philosophical figures to develop simultaneous narratives that engage and suspend

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<sup>28</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, p.4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.25.

dialogues through the formal patterning of the poem. The consequences and the possibilities that his poetic holds for the self are all realised through the transformations of language. His poetry and his lecture brings to mind the findings of T. S Eliot, who claimed in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', that the poet's mind was a vessel for 'seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images,' all of which exist in the mind until 'all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together'.<sup>31</sup> In Muldoon whilst these may be 'present together', as will be seen, they do not 'unite' to form a new compound; they transform to reveal any number of compounds as the particles continue to resonate across space.

In the work of both poets then, the problems of perspective inherent in the use of intertextuality are balanced by the consolations of the forms that remain. Whilst temporary, incomplete and incomparable to the power of experience, Mahon and Muldoon forge a poetry in which the failings of language are lived through their experience of it. They offer poetry that, in the words of fellow poet Louis MacNeice is 'enemy and image of ourselves'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 13-22. p.19.

<sup>32</sup> 'Brother Fire' in Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966). p.196.

## 2. 'Some Notional Interface': Myth and Metamorphosis in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon

In *To Ireland, I*, Paul Muldoon offers a view of poetic inheritance based on a unique form of intertextuality amongst Irish writers that 'goes beyond a mere interest in the allusive' to generate a form of survival 'symptomatic of several deep-seated senses.' It generates poetry that is 'binary', that admits a 'sense of two discrete coexistent realms. Two texts.'<sup>1</sup> His claims offer a view of literary inheritance that combines the imagination of the poet with that of past writers, their influence an instrumental part of the writers' potential 'to mutate and transmogrify' and to become part of a continuum in which one writer blends imperceptibly with another. This concept of a felt presence, or an intangible 'sense' of a shared inheritance is not unique to Muldoon. Derek Mahon has also described intertextuality in terms of a sense impression, 'I like there to be a certain gravity somewhere in the offing, some residual echo of traditional form'.<sup>2</sup> The response from both poets raise difficult questions regarding the mutation or blending of two texts and how these interact with each other. Is the 'sense' or 'residual echo' from other texts one that sits alongside the poet's own work, or that becomes integrated within it? What is it that these poets are asking the reader to question, reconcile or restore and how are these forms of intertextuality to be understood?

This chapter will address these questions through a discussion of allusion, adaptation and translation, paying attention to the way in which these are incorporated into their work. It will show the use of intertextuality to be central to two main aspects of their poetry: the exiled voice and the *process* of exile as an essential formal component of the 'sense' of continuity. Focusing on the appearance of the Roman poet Ovid, in their poetry, the historical and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*. p.24.

<sup>2</sup> Eamon Grennan, 'The Art of Poetry LXXXII: Derek Mahon', *The Paris Review*, 42 (2000), 150-178. p. 168.

contexts that establish his practices as a recurrent figure will be discussed to show how they inform the formal aspects of their poetry. The chapter will then look at forms of survival as they have been approached in literary criticism, before moving towards an understanding of intertextuality as part of an imaginative process that incorporates the self-conscious act of writing into the formal structure of the poem. Finally it will answer the claims for an intertextuality that goes beyond 'mere' allusion using the mythical figure of Tithonus.

## 2.1 Myth and Transformation

Critical interest in the type and effect of intertextuality in Irish writers, particularly those from Northern Ireland, grew during the last decades of the twentieth century demonstrating a growing interest in the way it exemplified a form of social and political dialogues. This interest culminated in a number of books and articles throughout the 1990s and early 2000s by critics such as Neil Corcoran and Peter McDonald who noted the degree to which Irish poets were looking beyond their own cultural influences to find a new way of responding or relating to national pressures.<sup>3</sup> The influence of figures such as Louis MacNeice, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas was explored in relation to Muldoon, and Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice and a number of modern French poets in relation to Mahon, all figures who had either exiled themselves from Ireland for some or all of their life, or who hail from elsewhere. The search for figures outside Ireland as a means of engaging and exploring what it 'meant' to be an Irish writer subsequently became a narrative development both within the literature produced at the time as well as in critical responses to poetry. Literary, historical and mythical figures became incorporated into the work of these poets through a variety of intertextual forms, raising questions about the presence of

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<sup>3</sup> See Kerrigan, pp. 237-269. Murphy, 193-203; Robert Faggen, 'Irish Poets and the World', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 229-249; Corcoran; Rachel Buxton, 'No Never Quite Showing His Hand: Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 26-44; Longley, pp. 90-111.

past forms and how these could help the reader understand the political and personal proclivities of the poet.

The presence of the classical poet Ovid was also linked to Northern Irish poets through his appearance in the work of, amongst others, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, John Hewitt, Tom Paulin, and Louis MacNeice, in addition to Muldoon and Mahon. Both as a figure of exile and as a writer Ovid represented the exiled intellectual, forced to live out his life on Tomis. His appearance amongst Northern Irish poets has thus been interpreted as a colonial allusion, connecting to feelings of uncertainty and displacement in their work throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

John Kerrigan's discussion of 'Exposure', the poem that closed Heaney's controversial 1975 collection *North*, notes Heaney's sense of guilt and persecution as he sits 'weighing and weighing/My responsible *tristia*'.<sup>4</sup> Unable to reconcile himself with the personal and political pressures that enter the poem he recoils into a symbolic landscape in which these anxieties remain unresolved. The final sense, as Kerrigan suggests, is a mixture of 'pride, doubt and self-deprecation.'<sup>5</sup> It is a transformation that takes an Ovidian course however, calling on the 'protective colouring' of its natural surroundings and finding release in an inward journey of redemption through the aesthetic. The transformation connects and explains, albeit indirectly, the relationship between the poet's anxieties and his closing vision:

I am neither internee nor informer;

An inner emigré, grown long-haired  
And thoughtful; a wood kerne

Escaped from the massacre,  
Taking protective colouring  
From bole and bark, feeling  
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks  
For their meagre heat, have missed

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<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, *North*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) p.67.

<sup>5</sup> Kerrigan, p.240.

The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
The comet's pulsing rose. [N, 66]

Heaney's transformation to 'wood kerne' inscribes his exile as one, if not resolved, at least restored to the natural order. Whilst the poem he offers is uncertain in its final image, his vision is in harmony with the poetic voice and his transformation one that connects and explains the relationship between the poet's anxieties and his closing vision.<sup>6</sup>

Heaney's contemporary Mahon and successor Muldoon incorporate this Ovidian transformation of poet to place, but the form this expression takes is markedly different. In contrast to Heaney their engagement with Ovid and classical literature more generally does not reconcile or restore the balance between the historical and the aesthetic anxieties of the poet, it develops the protean qualities of Ovid's vision, inviting the reader to question what it is that the poet is asking the reader to reconcile or restore. Intertextuality is not just the use of texts from other poets, but the deliberate and visible borrowing of key characteristics of their works within those of the poet's own body of work. It is therefore a more insidious and subtle form of interaction and one that can be related to several conceptual or thematic areas simultaneously. One recurrent example in Muldoon and Mahon is that of the formal qualities of their work and the way in which Ovid becomes integrated as both poet and process. Ovid's works resonate with issues of exile but also of a style that thrives on the plurality of its potential meanings, as Andrew Feldherr notes of *Metamorphoses*:

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<sup>6</sup> The 'protective colouring' Heaney describes is one that he had elaborated on a year earlier in a lecture given at the Royal Society of Literature, 'Traditionally an oracle speaks in riddles, yielding its truths in disguise, offering its insights cunningly. And in the practice of poetry, there is a corresponding occasion of disguise, a protean, chameleon moment when the lump in the throat takes protective colouring in the new element of thought.' He connects his writing of poetry at this time with political and cultural pressures, stating later on in this lecture that from the start of the troubles poetry ceased to be a 'matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon' and began 'being the search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament'. See Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), pp. 41-60.

The challenge of comprehending metamorphosis means that each instance compels the reader to make a choice between different interpretations of the poem that bring into play all its discursive levels — the literary, the political, the theological.<sup>7</sup>

This same ‘sense’ of plurality is evident in the work of both poets, in their use of past voices or poems from literary and historical sources. Opening up their poetic to haunting cyclical structures and dramatic narratives the unified and redemptive voice of Heaney's more traditional aesthetics is set amongst the uncertainty of past forms, making it difficult to locate an authoritative viewpoint. This is further complicated by Mahon’s propensity to revisit his own work. What the poem ‘means’ is consequently altered and modified by this process, so that the memory of a past sentiment, idea or place, might re-appear, engaging in a dialogue between past and present poems. In this way the original text is replaced with the ‘sense’ of a past that is altered or replaced in subsequent revisions.

This type of ‘adaptive’, or evolving allusion, is particularly evident in both poets, the revision producing both a sense of continuity and renewal. It gives rise to universal characteristics of figures or forms that carry a past context with them, one that is positioned in relation to the new form they create. In the work of Muldoon these allusions are evident in the reinvention of the shape-shifting figure that is Gallogly as he ‘juggles’ around his name in ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Want’ (hereafter ‘The More a Man Has’). It is here that Muldoon’s first allusion to Ovid appears as he recounts the tale of the Goddess Leto who transforms the Lycian reed cutters into frogs after she is refused a drink from their lake:

In Ovid’s conspicuously tongue-in-cheek  
account of an eyeball  
to eyeball  
between the goddess Leto  
and a shower of Lycian reed cutters  
who refuse her a cup of cloudy  
water

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Feldherr, ‘Metamorphoses in the Metamorphoses’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. by Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 163-178. p.178.

from their churned up lake,  
*Live then forever in that lake of yours,*  
 she cries, and has them  
 bubble  
 and squeak  
 and plonk themselves down as bullfrogs  
 in their icy jissom.

[P,127]

Appearing amidst competing narratives of political, sexual and textual violence, the story of the Goddess Leto serves as yet another possible disguise for the transformations that the main character Gallogly undergoes to avoid capture. John Kerrigan uses this example to illustrate the self-conscious questioning of language in Muldoon's poetic, drawing attention to Ovid's tendency to draw names from the qualities of things and noting Muldoon's similar pleasure in the 'aetiological narrative', and the 'semantic change in relation to shifted elements within word-forms'.<sup>8</sup> The inhospitality of the reed cutters seals their fate as bullfrogs: their condition neither human nor animal they inhabit a space in between, one that sees them exiled to an 'icy jissom', the sound sense carrying the fate of the bullfrogs beyond the certainty of semantic explication.<sup>9</sup>

Muldoon's adaptation of Ovid's story here is in marked contrast to the version that appears in his 1994 collection *The Annals of Chile*. It reappears as a longer narrative poem in contrast to the shape-shifting exploits of the terrorist figure and fugitive, Gallogly:

That was it: that was as much as the Titan's daughter  
 could take; 'Since you've shown', she cried, 'no soft spot  
 for me, in this soft spot you'll always stay'.  
 And stay they have: now they love nothing more to play  
 in water, giving themselves over to total  
 immersion or contentedly skimming the surface; they dawdle  
 on the bank only to dive back in; now, as ever,  
 they work themselves into a lather  
 over some imagined slight; since they continually curse  
 and swear their voices are hoarse

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<sup>8</sup> Kerrigan, p.250.

<sup>9</sup> The term as spelled, 'jissom' is not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is linked to 'jism', a slang term for semen.

while their necks, in so far as there's anything between  
 their heads and shoulders, are goitred; with their yellow  
 paunches set off by backs of olive green,  
 they go leaping about the bog-hole with their frog fellows.

[AC, 3]

This later version offers a story in which the change of state is described after it has taken place, as opposed to its appearance in 'The More a Man Has' where the change of form is carried through the 'bubble' and 'squeak' that brings the act of transformation in to focus. Here, the focus has moved from the *act* of transformation to transformation that is enacted by the poetic voice. The movement is from a visual immediacy to a textual transition. How then, is the reappearance of the later version to be understood in relation to its earlier manifestation? Why does Muldoon choose the same passage from *Metamorphoses* in two entirely different contexts, one in connection with sectarian violence and suffering, the other to open a collection that is predominantly elegiac and autobiographical?

The first point to note is that Muldoon is offering the reader an example of a transformation *of* a transformation, that of the sudden and violent earlier version to the dramatic narrative that prefaces *The Annals of Chile*. Following on from this, its reappearance heralds the importance of form, both in 'The More a Man Has' and throughout *The Annals of Chile*. Its earlier incarnation offers a shape-shifting within the body of the text that foregrounds the body politic and the human body. It connects to the main thematic concerns of the sequence but it is also representative of its time, given that *Quoof* was published shortly after the Long Kesh Hunger strikes. Its transformation in *The Annals* is also thematic, transforming to a shape-shifting *upon* the body of the text. Muldoon is unable to change the course of history for the dead, but he can exert the 'sense' of an afterlife on them, returning aspects of the past through a manipulation of form.

This is evident in the passage above from the repetition of words and phrases, as they return a schematic echo of the hollowed out forms through the verse. 'Themselves', 'they' and the homonyms 'their' and 'there' appear repeatedly in these lines. Fourteen instances over fourteen lines mark and remark the indeterminate forms that remain, recalling them through patterns of returning words, but not as either the unfortunate Lycian reed cutters or the frogs. They

exist as spectres of a former self through the returns of language. This same effect is to be found in 'Yarrow' and 'Incantata'. Tim Kendall and Clair Willis have both discussed the elaborate patterns that appear in the elegies within *The Annals* paying particular attention to the mirroring effect of rhyme in Muldoon's poetic. As Kendall's detailed analysis of this rhyme scheme notes the poem repeats the same twelve units of end-words throughout the poem in various orders, with various modulations hence the closing twelve line stanza uses rhyme to echo the opening stanza: row/arrow; pink/mink; us/lus(rous), and so on.<sup>10</sup> This patterning is not random, as the poem rhymes the first and last stanzas, second and penultimate and so forth, so the second half of the poem mirrors the first. These formal patterns link poems across collections, almost imperceptibly, developing a form of intertextuality that establishes itself on the basis of repeating sounds, particularly as they appear in the formal and internal rhyming schemes of Muldoon's poems.

These examples develop two main aspects of Muldoon's claim for 'several deep seated senses'. The first is the presence of a repetition or an 'echo', whether acoustic, allegorical or schematic through the formal figures and structures of the poem. The second is the conceptual and formal use of intertextuality to maintain a dialogue between current and past texts, or between competing parts of the same text, as the story of Leto demonstrates.

The same reliance on form is true of Mahon, who has shown a sustained interest throughout his career in the works of Ovid.<sup>11</sup> As with Muldoon, instances where the Roman poet appears in Mahon's poetry often coincide with a

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1996). p.228.

<sup>11</sup> The figure of Ovid first appears in Mahon's 1975 collection *The Snow Party* in 'Going Home.' This reappears with a new title, 'The Return' in Mahon's 1979 collection, *Poems 1962-1978*. There are subsequent allusions to Ovid in the 1982 collection, *The Hunt by Night* in a poem that draws on Ovid for its title, 'Ovid in Tomis' and in his 1998 collection *The Yellow Book*, 'Ovid on West 4th'. In addition to his continued presence in Mahon's poems, a translation from the *Amores*, entitled 'Ovid in Love', appeared in Mahon's 1986 collection *Antarctica*, and a translation from Book X of the *Metamorphoses* appeared as 'Pygmalion and Galatea' in *The Hudson Letter* in 1995. This appeared again in both Mahon's *Collected Poems* in 1999 and his more recent *Adaptations* in 2005 with the protracted title 'Galatea'.

formal reluctance to align the poetic voice with the form that remains. 'Going Home' a poem in which the title itself undergoes a transformation between its first and subsequent appearances, carries the sense of a recurrence as well as to return to a place. The poem evokes the desire to stay in England, in preference to his imminent return to Ireland in 1977 to take up a post at the University of Ulster:

And often thought if I lived  
 Long enough in this house  
 I would turn into a tree  
 Like somebody in Ovid  
 A small tree certainly  
 But a tree nevertheless -

Perhaps befriend the oak,  
 The chestnut and the yew,  
 Become a home for birds,  
 A shelter for the nymphs,  
 And gaze out over the downs  
 As if I belonged here too.

[CP, 95]

Mahon's sense of alienation from his native home is evoked in Ovidian terms, recalling the transformation of Daphne in Book I of the *Metamorphoses*. Daphne calls upon the divine powers of the river Peneus to save her from the advances of Apollo and as her wish is granted she is transformed into a laurel tree. Mahon imagines his transformation into the pastoral landscape of England, contrasting this with the nightmare vision of the Coleraine landscape as a barren place transformed to a 'last stubborn growth...twisted by sea-wind' that 'stands on the edge of everything/Like a burnt out angel'. This movement is one that transforms vision to nightmare, but that repeats the exile of Mahon from the tainted pastoral of England to the dislocated symbol of a 'burnt-out angel' that stands in for the landscape of Ulster. The slippage from one to the other evokes his alienation from both places, but the first half of the poem also connects and returns the transformation of Mahon as the tree to the final image of the burnt out figure, the 'As if I belonged here too' of the fifth stanza returning the 'As if it belongs there' in the tenth stanza, the final line of the poem. The poem neither removes or integrates the two visions, leaving the imprint of one to find the trace of the former in the final line of the poem.

Formally, the poem awakens a sense of the past in the present. It is this same effect that generates an impalpable immensity, or as Mahon's Ovid put it, 'the infinity/Under our very noses'.<sup>12</sup> 'Ovid in Tomis, from which these lines are taken, appeared in Mahon's 1982 collection, *The Hunt by Night*. Like Muldoon's Gallogly, Ovid comes to represent the 'everyman' figure in Mahon, because, as Kerrigan notes, he exists amidst locations that are removed from a sense of time.<sup>13</sup> The poem imagines Ovid exiled to Tomis. It calls upon the lost world of the *Metamorphoses*, invoking Ovidian characters directly, as well as sending a ripple of recollection back to his earlier poem 'Going Home', in which the image of the self transforming into a tree appears again in 'Ovid in Tomis' with the 'real sense/Of the dumb spirit/In boulder and tree'.<sup>14</sup> Ovid is himself transformed 'into a stone' in the opening lines of the poem, his post-existence the starting point for a meditation on the past and the future. As memories of his life and work are revisited throughout the poem, the hopes, fears and observations of the world are incorporated into a narrative that question faith, mortality and the profound solitude of exile that becomes the inspiration for Ovid's great legacy. Two voices collide at the end of this poem, that of Ovid's with Mahon's as the 'I' throughout the poem gives way in the final lines to the 'our' as the poem draws to a close:

Better to contemplate  
The blank page  
And leave it blank

Than modify  
Its substance by  
So much as a pen-stroke.

Woven of wood-nymphs,  
It speaks volumes  
No one will ever write.

I incline my head

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<sup>12</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, p.41.

<sup>13</sup> Kerrigan, p.265.

<sup>14</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, p.40. In 'Going Home', Mahon states, 'And often thought if I lived/Long enough in this house/I would turn into a tree/Like somebody in Ovid'. Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p.95.

To its candour  
And weep for our exile.

[HBN, 37]

As with the sense of there being two voices in 'Going Home', here Mahon takes Ovid's soliloquy and marries it in the final line with a communal sense of exile. This undoubtedly echoes something of the 'Latin Ulsterman', but it also echoes with the philosophical anxieties of its own 'post-existence'.<sup>15</sup> Formally Mahon returned to the sparse tercets of 'Ovid in Tomis' in *The Hunt by Night*, a book that overwhelmingly concerned itself with the post-existence of the artist and is expressed as a transformation of one life into the work of another. His adaptations, like Muldoon's, become protean forms in their own right, evolving and multiplying through the appearance and re-appearance of 'likeness' in form or in content both within and across collections.

As these two examples show the revision of the past is differently applied by Mahon and Muldoon. Muldoon's use of Ovid concentrates on the etymological slippage that comes through subtle transformations between words, but also through the parabolic force of Ovid's stories as he develops narratives that combine or sit alongside narratives of cultural and historical significance. His poems also develop patterns of repetition and return generated by the flow from one like term to another, developing a blend of meanings that form a resistant semantic surface across his poems. Mahon in contrast allows the questioning of historical or cultural perspectives to arise from the duplicity of his visions, the formal structure of his poems placing his own voice over and amongst the historical and mythical figures that permeate his work. The appearance of Ovid shows how he is able to move between real and imagined spaces through returning patterns of language or vision. The effect in both is an evolving echo of the past that blends and shifts as these elements return.

## 2.2 Figuring Echoes

The myth of Tithonus has been revisited by numerous poets in the past and in the present day. Ovid himself incorporated a fleeting glance to this myth in his early

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<sup>15</sup> Kerrigan, p.266.

work *Amores* to contrast the time-bound world of his lovers with that of the external and infinite existence of Tithonus. In his brief allusion to the myth, the arrival of Aurora returns the memory of her 'poor old husband' as she brings the dawn to disturb the lovers sleeping. Her returning figure, an aesthetic and romanticised symbol of visionary transcendence is contrasted with the lovers finite and limited existence. Aspects of this figure return in the work of subsequent poets engaged with the inherited pressures and anxieties of time and place. Looking first at how patterns of intertextuality return and transform a text, this section will also show how the myth of Tithonus is transformed by the Irish poet. Past critical works have concerned themselves with the afterlife of an utterance and how this can be either subconsciously or consciously applied by successive writers. A seminal text on the intertextuality of the echo and one relevant to the type of intertextuality present in Muldoon and Mahon is John Hollander's 1981 study *The Figure of Echo*.<sup>16</sup> Hollander's study is of particular importance for the emphasis it places on the 'revisionary power' of language. He identifies five main forms of Echo, acoustical, allegorical, schematic, metaphorical and metaleptic, in an engaging examination of the forms of echoic patterns that are passed from one text, one historical moment to another. Hollander claims that poets echo the voices of their forebears, either consciously or unconsciously, with a 'shaping spirit' that 'gives form to tropes of thought and feeling'.<sup>17</sup> Echo, as Hollander notes, pre-dates Ovid, appearing in Homer, where it emerges as 'reverberations and amplifications of battle noise or of trees falling in forests'.<sup>18</sup> The personification of Echo appears later and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is concerned primarily with language, as the story tells the figure of Echo, reduced to her voice alone after deceiving the goddess Juno.<sup>19</sup> Hollander identifies two strands of mythographic interpretation from the tale of Echo, that followed from medieval to Renaissance literature, that of 'Echo as the daughter of air and language'. More importantly, Hollander notes that representations of

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<sup>16</sup> John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Hollander, Preface.

<sup>18</sup> Hollander, p.6.

<sup>19</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary Innes, (London: Penguin Books, 1955).

Echo were more than the sound, she was allegorized as a form of ‘celestial harmony’ whose invisibility was an ‘apt symbol of the *harmonia coeliae* which cannot be perceived by our senses’.

In particular, Hollander’s study develops modes of allusion that are based on repeated and reverberating sounds as well as on ‘verbal patterns and schemes’ of language.<sup>20</sup> His study makes a clear distinction however, between the acoustical appearance of Echo and her reemergence as a schematic textual figure. This bestows visual qualities on a figure that has traditionally been acoustically defined, opening up her schematic presence to discuss forms of repetition that occur phonologically, such as alliteration, assonance, full rhyme, reduplication and refrain. Discussing allegorical echo, he draws attention to romantic images of echoing, noting the centrality of the figure and the effect in William Wordsworth’s poem, ‘The Power of Sound’.<sup>21</sup> It is important here for what it tells the reader of echo historically, but also of how it continues to be applied and adapted by more contemporary poets:

Ye Voices, and ye Shadows  
 And Images of voice - to hound and horn  
 From rocky steep and rock-bestudded meadows  
 Flung back, and in the sky’s blue care reborn—  
 On with your pastime! Till the church-tower bells  
 A greeting give of measured glee;  
 And milder echoes from their cells  
 Repeat the bridal symphony.

[359]

As Hollander notes, this poem offers a complex figure that marries notions of Echo visually and acoustically.<sup>22</sup> The repetitive acoustic elements blend with subtle shifts in image, from ‘horn’ to ‘hound’, ‘rocky-steep’ to ‘rock-bestudded’ whilst simultaneously the repetition of consonants and assonants, ‘g’, ‘l’, ‘e’ and ‘o’ in particular, mimic the shift from vision to sound. This is also amplified by

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<sup>20</sup> Hollander, p.23.

<sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). p.359. For discussion see Hollander p.19.

<sup>22</sup> Hollander, p.19.

the move from 'shadow' to 'meadow', from 'horn' to 'reborn', 'bell' to 'cell', all of which mimic the subtle shifts between visual form and imagined spaces.

Hollander's theory of poetic survival has been discussed more recently by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, who returns to Hollander in his discussion of the different forms of survival and afterlife, paying particular attention to Hollander's claim that 'the whole of history may be said to constitute a chain of answers to the first texts'. The 'chain of answers', as Douglas-Fairhurst points out, suggests that writers 'answer for other people as well as to them' through the 'minute matter of a single word of scheme'.<sup>23</sup> This sits a little uncomfortably with Douglas-Fairhurst, who claims that Hollander's vision of influence skirts close to Bloom's theory that 'poems never answer to anything but poems.'<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Douglas-Fairhurst expands on Hollander's ideas to demonstrate how poets express something of themselves and of their historical moment through their connections with past literature.

Writing on Victorian poetry 21 years after Hollander's study of *Echo*, Douglas-Fairhurst's study points out that the Victorians created their own systems of influence in direct response to the 'variety and strength of the cultural pressures which were brought to bear on it'.<sup>25</sup> He discusses the 'vocabulary of influence' that developed throughout the nineteenth century, claiming that 'the language of influence was used to measure fluid exchanges between theories and vocabularies which were themselves unfixed and uncertain'.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, Fairhurst concentrates on the idea of influence 'as a discourse' created by and for Victorian writers to question the idea of the 'self' and its survival through tracing the 'afterlife of the utterance'.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence In Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). p.39.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p.39. A claim Hollander makes himself in the preface when he states he is only considering 'a way of alluding that is inherently poetic, rather than expository'. See Preface to Hollander.

<sup>25</sup> Fairhurst, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

In his discussion of self and survival, Fairhurst cites the philosopher Derek Parfitt whose discussion concerning the liberation from the self through death establishes an acknowledgement that whilst direct connections will not exist once he is dead, that ‘experiences’ and ‘memories’ will remain and may influence later thoughts.<sup>27</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst uses Parfitt’s epistemological exploration of the self to suggest that ‘it is not personal identity but survival, not absolute psychological ‘continuity’ but a looser form of psychological ‘connectedness’ that is of primary concern to the poet.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that rather than focusing on a poet’s predecessors to determine examples of, or the degree to which a poet has been influenced by their forebears, critical attention should turn itself to subtler forms of survival, such as the recurrence of particular images, phrases or words that reappear across generations and cultures. In advancing an understanding of influence as a looser ‘connectedness’, Douglas-Fairhurst also turns to Wordsworth as an example, claiming that his poems, ‘often lamented the interrupted and forgotten lives which are marked in the landscape by a ‘shapeless heap of stones’, and whose architectural metaphors disclose a lasting interest in the integrity of his own ‘heap of stones’.<sup>29</sup> In poems such as ‘Michael’, Wordsworth uses the image of ‘a straggling heap of unhewn stones’ beside a brook as a conscious mark on the landscape to which ‘a story appertains’, claiming that<sup>30</sup>:

...although it be a history  
Homely and rude, I will relate the same  
For the delight of a few natural hearts  
And yet with fonder feeling, for the sake  
Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills  
Will be my second self when I am gone.

[131]

Wordsworth directly links the stones to the story of the Shepherd, Michael, so that it will not be lost to future generations of poets. The stones become a marker, a

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Parfitt, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University, 1984). p.281.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p.22.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p.24.

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, *The Oxford Authors*.

historical artefact, which enables the past to be brought into play and as Wordsworth openly acknowledges, allows part of his work to be passed on to other poets, to become a 'second self'.

Irish poets have read, internalised and subsequently developed patterns of language to similar effect, appropriating and adapting these same images and patterns. The image of the stone appears with redemptive Catholic force in Heaney's *Station Island*. In addition to the short poem 'An Aisling in the Burren' in which the 'clatter of stones' offers a 'sermon/on conscience and healing', in section IX of 'Station Island', Heaney uses the image of the stone like Wordsworth to lament the limitations of the poet.

As if the cairnstone could defy the cairn.  
As if the eddy could reform the pool.  
As if a stone swirled under a cascade,  
Eroded and eroding in its bed,  
Could grind itself down to a different core.

[SI,86]

It is also used in marked contrast in several of Mahon's poems: 'Ovid in Tomis, as mentioned above, 'Lives' and 'Tithonus' all re-visit the image of the 'stone' as a past, or series of past lives. Muldoon's translation of Ovid similarly brings these past lives to mind as Leto 'came on a lake in the midst of which/stood an ancient altar, its stones blackened/by many sacrificial fires,' but it is an image that Muldoon has also used more recently for his self portrait in 'The Outlier', in which his parentage is figured in stones, 'In Armagh or Tyrone/on a morning in June/I fell between two stones.'<sup>31</sup>

Whilst his focus is Victorian literature, Douglas-Fairhurst's study of influence and intertextuality acknowledges the universality of these kinds of textual and thematic returns. In his discussion of Tennyson's 'sympathetic imagination', as will be seen, he explores the poet's ability to hold the past anxieties of writers and transform these within his text into a feeling for past expression. He illustrates the timeless nature of these themes in his example of Hamm in Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame' who asks 'Can there be misery loftier

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<sup>31</sup> Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006). p.47.

than mine?’ To which Douglas-Fairhurst notes that the ‘history of tragedy could be summed up’ in this question as it manifests the twin anxieties that either answer to this question might be true.<sup>32</sup>

In bringing together these attributes from two distinct time periods Douglas-Fairhurst demonstrates the repetition of an ‘everyman figure’. His discussion of Tennyson in light of the tragic and timeless historical figure suggests the existence of ‘stories’ that ‘echo deeper narrative patterns’. More generally, his comments express the returning desire of poets past and present, to try and answer Hamm’s question, or to show how it is always doomed to fail. Similarly, Muldoon and Mahon have developed a poetics in which the ‘everyman’ figure appears as part of a dialogue of survival. This questions not only the personal significance of the poet, it shows how both poets develop the tensions and anxieties of their heritage through their repeated returns to the exiled voice.

The effect of this is often confusion and equivocation on who is speaking or on what the allusion contributes to the poem, particularly in relation to whether the allusion invoked is meant to legitimate or resist the narrative voice, to reflect or refract the concerns of the poet. This is not an uncommon or unique aspect of allusion; however, the extent to which it occurs and is written about in Irish literature suggests that allusion mediates an intertextual boundary in which questions of ‘meaning’ and the instabilities of language become the overarching concern of the poet and in so doing, allusions and other forms of indirection are, in Beckettian style, left to question the basis of their own existence. The ‘move beyond the mere allusive’ then, is a self-conscious comment on how and whether the text is able to, or should, reflect a personal, public or cultural consciousness.

### **2.3 Tithonus: The Mythic ‘Everyman’**

The myth of Tithonus recounts that Eos, or Aurora, saw Tithonus, fell in love with him and abducted him. She asked Zeus to grant Tithonus immortality, which he did, but Aurora forgot to ask him to grant Tithonus eternal youth. The myth follows that Aurora remained unchanged whilst Tithonus grew old and shrank to

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p.209.

the point where he had to be put in a wicker basket like a child. Aurora eventually changed him into a cicada.<sup>33</sup>

Originating in Greek mythology, the story has been revisited by poets across the ages appearing in poems by Sappho, Ovid and Homer through to Tennyson and more recently appearing in poems by Mahon and Muldoon. The figure as it has evolved and developed through its many revivals illustrates the nature and complexity of a recursive figure to which, as with Wordsworth's heap of stones, 'a story appertains'. Its reappearance over time also illustrates the ways in which the myth develops meta-narratives that feed into future versions.

Tennyson's version of the Tithonus myth was originally written in 1833-34 and at that time entitled 'Tithon'. It was not published as 'Tithonus' until 1860 after substantial revisions to the original poem when Tennyson was poet Laureate, having taken up the position in 1850 after the death of William Wordsworth.<sup>34</sup> Tennyson was writing 'Tithonus' at a difficult time personally, still grieving for the loss of his friend Hallam, but it was also a difficult time for Tennyson in his capacity as poet Laureate. As T. S. Eliot noted, Tennyson lived in a time that was 'acutely time-conscious'.<sup>35</sup> Developments in science and industry created an atmosphere of change, of 'no hold on permanent things, on permanent truths about man and God and life and death'.<sup>36</sup> The opening lines of his poem register this impermanence and uncertainty as the natural world transforms the world about him into 'vapours'. This action is reflected in the figure of Tithonus, who also 'withers', his exile from time a reflection that oscillates between the 'real' time of the natural world and the eternal oblivion of Tithonus's fate:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan.

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<sup>33</sup> Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). p.457.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *Poems by Alfred Tennyson*, (London: Edward Moxon, 1846).

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'In Memoriam', in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 328-338. p.337.

<sup>36</sup> Eliot, 'In Memoriam', p.337.

Me only cruel immortality  
 Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,  
 Here at the quiet limit of the world,  
 A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream  
 The ever-silent spaces of the East,  
 Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. [96-97]

Tennyson's poem mimics the textual movement between the visible and invisible worlds of the suffering Tithonus, the natural world that is visible and cyclical is contrasted with the 'quiet limit' and 'ever-silent spaces' that house Tithonus, as his identity is gradually eroded and replaced with the memory of a former self. The repetition of words here and more generally throughout the poem bring with it the action of memory within the text and concerns itself not only with echo, but with self-echo, repeating and returning to aspects of form that generate both connection and movement.

The most notable of these aspects is the extensive use of rhyme. Douglas-Fairhurst points out that the prefixes 'de' in 'decay' and 'departest' and 're' in 'recall', 'release', 'restore', 'renew' and 'returning' that recur throughout the poem offer a self-echo, one that returns Tithonus's memory 'in a form of historical ventriloquism'.<sup>37</sup> In this respect sound becomes the predominant 'returning' mechanism of memory, bringing back the past, not as it was, but as it has been remembered 'in days far-off, and with what other eyes'. This movement between the visual and acoustic functions of memory develop a tension between the romantic impulse to restore the self through the visionary and redemptive force of the natural world and the Victorian fears that, like Tithonus, the self can never be restored.

Tennyson's echo also brings back that of Ovid's mythological character, through the mimicry of returning forms. Tithonus 'withers slowly' his 'wrinkled feet' wandering the 'glimmering thresholds' between being and non-being, between the voice that pleads for release and the echo that transforms Tithonus's pleas as they 'renew' and 'return' as the poem draws to an end. Both in Tennyson's form and in the landscape that surrounds Tithonus, Tennyson's protagonist returns to the figure of Echo in the *Metamorphoses*:

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 228.

She became wrinkled and wasted; all the freshness of her beauty withered into the air. Only her voice and her bones were left, till finally her voice alone remained; for her bones, they say, were turned to stone. Since then, she hides in the woods, and, though never seen on the mountains, is heard by there by all: for her voice is the only part of her that still lives.<sup>38</sup>

Echo is subsumed by the natural world, confined to exist as sound returning from natural spaces. In her allegorical function, Echo, as John Hollander notes ‘comes to stand for crucial questions about language itself’, a ‘trope of diachrony, of the distance between prior and successive poems’.<sup>39</sup> Tennyson’s allusive return brings this function with it, drawing questions of the afterlife of poet and poem from the returning form, not only of Echo, but of the romanticised vision of language as a redemptive and restorative force. This is evident not only in the acoustic form of Echo as it appears in the words of Tithonus, but in the allusions that open and end Tennyson’s poem, framing his self-echoes with the disembodied voices of past poets. This effect provides the diachronic dimension to Tithonus’s suffering whilst also establishing how the figure is to endure in the present. The first line of the poem, recalls Wordsworth’s sixth book of ‘The Prelude’ in which the memory of his earlier self is returned and the poet transcends the loss of self through its renewal in the natural world<sup>40</sup>:

The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,  
The stationary blasts of water-falls,  
And every where along the hollow rent  
Winds thwarting winds, bewild'rd and forlorn,  
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,

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<sup>38</sup> Ovid, trans. Mary Innes, p.84. A.D. Melville’s more recent translation of Ovid also describes Echo in terms of the ‘waste’ of her frame . See Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). p.63.

<sup>39</sup> Hollander, p.21.

<sup>40</sup> Wordsworth. Christopher Ricks points out that Wordsworth’s lines had been published in 1845, before Tennyson’s revision of ‘Tithon’. See Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). p.202.

The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
 The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end. [464]

Wordsworth's 'self' is here restored, the natural world returning the voice to human form, the 'features of the same face', replacing the loss of his earlier self with a visual memory in which his move from the disembodied voice to the natural world signifies a redemptive force. In Tennyson's poem the landscape is not a redemptive force, but one that differentiates between his non-being and the regenerative force of Wordsworth's romanticised natural world. Yet, as Ricks notes, the allusion brings with it the voice of Wordsworth and a dialogue on inheritance, not only of Tennyson's inheritance of the Romantics, but of the 'heredity of men'.<sup>41</sup> This is borne out by Tennyson's further move back in time to the works of Dante Alighieri and a dispiriting conclusion to a poem that offers neither consolation, release or restoration for the suffering Tithonus or for the poet's interior battle with the uncertainties that beset him.

The phrase 'earth in earth' is taken from Dante's 'terra in terra' in the *Paradiso*<sup>42</sup> as Tennyson concludes 'I earth in earth forget these empty courts/And thee returning on thy silver wheels'. In using these sources to frame the poem Tennyson sets up a tension between the natural, mortal world and the immortal and supernatural world of the Gods. The allusion to Dante is taken from a work that he claimed was to 'remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity'.<sup>43</sup> For Tithonus, this cannot happen, nor can

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<sup>41</sup> Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p.202.

<sup>42</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Portable Dante*, ed. and trans. by Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995). p.541.

<sup>43</sup> Dante, p. XXX.

the story of his life ever be told, given that he is 'consumed by immortality' to the point at which his self and his voice are no longer discernible.

By the very inclusion of these sources, Tennyson's Tithonus remains suspended. As Ricks points out, 'neither the tragedy of immortal age nor the tragedy of death will be available to Tithonus',<sup>44</sup> instead what happens to Tithonus is his gradual dissolution, the death of the 'self' as Tithonus begins from the first verse to 'wither slowly in thine arms'. The transformation of Tithonus continues as the poem advances, as the hours progress, 'all I was, in ashes' receding even further to the 'dark world where I was born'. Tithonus, in his past form and being is dead. Regression to a time before himself in effect marks his death and language becomes 'that strange song' until his transformation is complete.

This reduction brings with it the equally complex movement between vision and voice. The poem carries the sense of the dissipating voice and image of Tithonus through the rhythmic returns, his self reduced to the fluid exchange that washes back and forth with the repetition and variation of sound as Tithonus narrates his fate. Tennyson, as Edgar Allen Poe commented, seemed to 'see with his ear',<sup>45</sup> a process made possible in part due to the echoes and self-echoes within his text already mentioned, but also due to the historical dialogues on survival that rest unresolved in the disembodied and exiled voice of his protagonist. Writing in uncertain times, Tennyson's language maintains a romantic hue, but it is riddled with a resistance that mimics his alienation from the world of Aurora and from humanity. His closing lines brings him finally to the paradox that he cannot be released nor 'forget these empty courts'.

Within this paradox, Tennyson establishes resistant dialogues on being and not-being, developing a mental landscape in which memory is inscribed on

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). p.418.

<sup>45</sup> John D. Jump, *Lord Alfred Tennyson: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge, 1996), p. 464. This heightened sense for past rhythms, both his own and those of other poets, is noted by critics who have given consideration to Tennyson's interest in Greek and Latin literature. Comments on Tennyson's knowledge of these sources and argued that they 'left an indelible imprint on Tennyson's ear'. See A. A. Markley, 'Finding the Modern Frames in Tennyson's Final Classical Poems', *Philological Quarterly*, 78 (1999), 455-478. p.455.

the figures that remain, whether literary or mythical. Emblems of romanticism flourish in his description of Aurora, her rejuvenating presence set in stark contrast to the eviscerated chambers that surround her returning form. Tennyson offers the figures of Tithonus and Aurora and their contrasting 'worlds' to develop the dynamic between absence and presence, spiritual and human, art and life, incorporating in the very forms he chooses the coded remains of personal and historical representations of human and artistic conflict. In so doing, he is returned to the paradox that the artist is similarly poised on the 'glimmering thresholds', on the brink of a figurative and textual space that moves irreconcilably between competing dialogues. Aurora's 'empty courts' symbolises the aesthetic transcendence of art, moving as with Wordsworth's landscape, from the sound and movement of the voice to the silent and static images that come to represent them and whilst Tennyson's poem is written with the tone of a romantic ode his dramatic voice recreating the image of Aurora now lost to him, her beauty and transcendence offers no release. Aurora offers no consolation or relief from the suffering, whether of the immortal Tithonus or the mortal figure of Tennyson.

In contrast to Tennyson, Mahon and Muldoon offer versions of the myth that are ironic and playful in content, but that also use intertextual sources to engage and transform more romantic notions of survival to one that concerns itself with more contemporary anxieties of post-industrial and post-modern survival. For Mahon, the myth takes the same sparse three line form as his earlier poems 'An Image from Beckett', 'Lives' and 'Ovid in Tomis', all of which evoke the bleak Beckettian worlds that appear again in 'Tithonus'. The transformation 'into a stone' in the earlier 'Ovid from Tomis' here becomes the 'rolling stone' on which Tithonus waits for his 'transfiguration' each instance connecting to a textual and historical movement in time, one that is realised through the natural world. The fate and consequence of Tithonus generates the 'everyman' figure already discussed, instilling the sense of a timeless and liminal landscape, but Mahon moves beyond the consequences for Tithonus's supernatural exile to focus on the natural world in order to debunk the romanticised landscape of Tennyson's 'Gleaming halls/Of morn'. An allusion to Beckett's 'The Unnameable' fronts the poem and is also the place to which he returns at the end of the poem. In form and content, Mahon takes aspects from Beckett's monologue to create a sense of

perpetual exile, consigning Tennyson's romantic vision to an unbreachable past, that is replaced with Tithonus echoing that of Beckett's lone voice :

Perhaps I shall die  
At long last,  
Face in the dust—

Having seen,  
Not that I asked,  
The light in the desert.

[ANT, 27]

The perpetual cyclical movement of the poem, the impulse to speak, the silence, the darkness, the isolation, and in particular the word 'perhaps' are all elements in the final part of Beckett's Trilogy. Even the 'unquiet silence' of Tithonus's voice and the sounds made by his narrative later in the poem evoke the voice of 'The Unnamable':

That I am not stone deaf is shown by the sounds that reach me. For though the silence here is almost unbroken, it is not completely so...after a long period of immaculate silence a feeble cry was heard, by me... After so long a silence a little cry, stifled outright. What kind of creature uttered it and, if it is the same, still does, from time to time?<sup>46</sup>

A voice beset by histories he does not quite understand or participate in, 'The Unnamable' is forever abandoned. His voice is unable to convey existence beyond itself, his 'world' is continually shifting and contradictory, his self is never fully formed, never exposed. He is a voice exiled from time and desperate to end his pitiful existence. In contrast to the voice in the 'Unnamable' however, Mahon surrounds his character with history, making the image of Tithonus more aware of his place outside it. For Kerrigan, this suggests the 'estranged voice' of a Protestant imagination aware of civilisation only as an exiled observer of it, but it also demonstrates Mahon's blending of more romanticised versions of pastoral

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<sup>46</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1959). p.271.

with Beckett's tendency to undermine the pastoral mode by consigning it to something that exists only in the memories of his protagonists.<sup>47</sup>

Discussing the Irish pastoral inheritance, Oona Frawley discusses Beckett's movement away from the picturesque visions of the Irish pastoral poems to an 'interior landscape' that 'corresponds to, and/or correlates with, the external contemporary landscape' in his work.<sup>48</sup> Frawley's exploration of Beckett's 'interior landscape' touches upon the way in which Beckett links natural elements back to time and memory, the only place where they exist in many of his works, noting how it functions only as a reminder of what has been lost. Discussing Beckett's subversion of the pastoral mode, Frawley suggests that 'a national literature is eclipsed by far more pressing questions about the nature of humanity and man's place - or placelessness - in the world'.<sup>49</sup> Beckett's landscape then, whilst distinctly anti-pastoral, draws on the memory of the pastoral tradition for its effect, providing the sense of loss and absence that is central to his work.

Mahon draws on this same tradition. Using the allusion to the Tithonus myth to explore themes of loss and displacement, Mahon adopts the 'estranged voice' of the Ulster Protestant, isolated and removed from civilisation.<sup>50</sup> As with Beckett, he offers a narrative in which memory is understood through recourse to the pastoral, 'nature is dead' and what remains is the memory of past wars and atrocities:

I forget nothing  
But if I told  
Everything in detail -

Not merely Golgotha  
And Krakatoa  
But the leaf-plink

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<sup>47</sup> Kerrigan, p.242.

<sup>48</sup> Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth Century Irish Literature* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005). p.105.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.135.

<sup>50</sup> See Kerrigan, p.242.

Of rain drops after  
Thermopylae,  
The lizard-flick

In the scrub as Genghis  
Khan entered Peking  
And the changing clouds,

I would need  
Another eternity,  
Perish the thought.

[SP, 170]

As Tithonus states, he natters on to 'break/the unquiet silence' and if he stops talking 'there is only the wind'. The only sounds made in the poem are Tithonus's recollections, the 'cheep' of other crickets long dead, the 'leaf-plink', the 'lizard-flick'. The yoking of war with natural beauty and with the resilience of the natural world brings an anguished silence to the exiled Tithonus. Civilisations become extinct, religious iconography and artistic expression, fragments of human hope and relief, give way to the silent presence of the flowers, the dead transfigured through the power and movement that builds as the poem moves towards this final image. Tithonus's description of what remains evokes a post apocalyptic world in which only the natural world is left to stand in for what has been lost and even this offers an image in which the violence remains undefeated, the 'riot of wild flowers/splitting the rocks' a further act of violence that recalls the absent dead, condensing and uniting the residual traces of violence, warfare and suffering through the interplay of sound and its silent manifestation in the inanimate image.

The poem evokes the same kind of 'post-history, post existence' that was previously described by Terence Brown when referring to Mahon's 'The Last of the Fire Kings'.<sup>51</sup> Brown argues that Mahon offers 'a place out of time' with none of the 'romantic concepts of nature as a restorative spiritual agent in

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<sup>51</sup> Terence Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: Place and Placelessness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 133-148. p135.

consciousness'.<sup>52</sup> Instead, he claims that Mahon offers up a set of 'expressive symbols in images of storm, rain, wind, cold, waves and elemental emptiness' that allow the poet to remain on the periphery.<sup>53</sup>

This is realised in *Tithonus* after the descriptions of the past turn from historical events to the mythical fate of Echo, her voice removed from its natural element and 'restored to stones'. From this point in the poem the 'sounds' of history disappear, as does history itself. The reader is left again with the same reductive image that occupies the opening lines, the dark, indescribable babblings of the absent *Tithonus*. Any romantic notions of the poet recalled through the 'stone' are replaced by the silence that remains.

His choice of Beckett, both here and in the poems that take on this similar form, is indicative of Mahon's re-mapping of historicised and idealised spaces, a process that Ireland has literally been subject to due to the troubles. Like Beckett's 'immaculate silence', Mahon retreats into the silent terrain of an ever changing interior landscape to revise the cultural and literary idealisation of place, finding in poems such as '*Tithonus*' and '*Ovid in Tomis*' a figure that through dramatic monologue, is removed from civilisation to 'confront the world of mute phenomena', a muteness that serves to augment his exclusion from historical narratives, as Jerzy Jarniewicz comments:

To be sentenced to exist outside history (which is the territory of the voice) is to be dispossessed of speech. Yet the voice of history is often a mistaken or misleading voice, if not a simple noise whose only function is to cover the vested interests of those who write historical narratives. If then, the voice of history is corrupt and suspect, silence stands for the true, undistorted reality, or in fact – the state of innocence. Silence embodies the only reliable knowledge; it is also the only adequate reaction to reality.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p135.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.135.

<sup>54</sup> Jerzy Jarniewicz, 'History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond', in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, ed. by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), pp. 83-96. p.86.

This silence is evident throughout Mahon's poetic, both in the 'elemental emptiness' that Brown finds and in the landscape of abandoned, lost or deceased objects that remain as the voice passes through them and stirs their remains. This play of the poetic voice on the images and objects is implicit in the form and transformation that occur both within individual poems and across collections. The voice of Tithonus is also that of the voice already consigned to history, as 'An Image from Beckett' demonstrates, in which the voice of Tithonus itself becomes nothing more than an adaptation and reincarnation of past to present:

They will have buried  
My great-grand children, and theirs  
Beside me by now

With a subliminal batsqueak  
Of reflex lamentation.  
Our knuckle bones

Litter the rich earth  
Changing, second by second,  
To civilizations

[CP, 40]

Unlike 'Tithonus', however, this voice has remained throughout Mahon's collections. It appeared again in *Lives*, his *Collected, Selected*, and *New Selected Poems*, when in contrast, 'Tithonus' which first appeared in *Antarctica*, was subsequently cut from his later *Collected* and *New Collected Poems*. This may have been an irony too great for Mahon to pass up, but the fact that 'An Image from Beckett' remains is also indicative of the poet's sustained interest in his predecessor and as Haughton notes, of Mahon's 'blueprint' for poems such as 'Ovid and Tomis' and 'Lives' that were to follow.<sup>55</sup> In his discussion of Tithonus, Haughton suggests that Mahon may have removed it from his body of work because it was 'perhaps too much an echo and shadow of other poems'.<sup>56</sup> Its removal also charts a continuing development in Mahon's poetic however, in which the voice is increasingly set against inherited spaces through which Mahon is able to explore the tensions between history and aesthetics. As Kerrigan notes

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<sup>55</sup>Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.65.

<sup>56</sup>Haughton, p.173.

whilst 'Tithonus' evokes the exiled mind that is in keeping with Mahon's Protestant background, the voice in the poem remains 'unremarkable' because of a 'sheerness of time and unplace around the characters'.<sup>57</sup> Unlike 'An Image from Beckett' or 'Ovid in Tomis', it does not place the poetic voice within an inherited landscape, which as a consequence obfuscates any cultural or personal context.

Discussing this allusion, Mahon stated that the line evoked 'a remote secular echo of the Church of Ireland liturgy with which I grew up'.<sup>58</sup> Here this secular echo evokes a 'Northern landscape/and a huddle/of houses along the shore' through which the voice transforms the visual to the silent objects that reflect light, darkness heat, cold, taste. Mahon generates a living impression of a place through the connection of voice to the visual object in this way, and unlike 'Tithonus', the connection to a historicised landscape, as will be seen in the following chapters on Mahon, allow the poetic voice to set itself against literary, cultural and personal dialogues simultaneously.

In Mahon's poetic, as in Muldoon's as will be seen, this is more than a formal technique, it is part of the inherent questioning of what remains by a process that makes art precisely out of this question. Discussing Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Andrew Feldherr notes how Ovid's 'static plastic images...contrast with the flow of the narrative in which they are embedded'. He goes on to point out that this contrast 'ceases to be a representation and gives the viewer/reader access to what it represents'.<sup>59</sup> In this way it becomes subject, as well as object of the poem. Mahon's play with sound and silence represents this contrast as does his repetition and revision of past forms, whether his own, or that of another. The intertextual life of his poems gain the 'residual echo' through this sustained contrast in his poetic *oeuvre*, from his early works through to his more recent collections. As will be seen, the play of sound and silence recall not only poems that transform idealised landscapes from past writers, such as 'Tithonus',

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<sup>57</sup> Kerrigan, p.267.

<sup>58</sup> Derek Mahon and Willie Kelly, 'Each Poem for Me Is a New Beginning', *The Cork Review*, 2 (1981), 10-12. p.11.

<sup>59</sup> Feldherr, p.176.

they also transform his own body of work, playing with issues of place and displacement through the use of the poetic voice as a means of engaging with or resisting cultural and personal narratives.

This interplay of sound and silence in both Mahon and Paul Muldoon has been explored more recently by Adrienne Janus.<sup>60</sup> Janus explores the acoustical resonance of Muldoon and Mahon in relation to Beckett, establishing a binary tension between an Irish modernist representation of Beckett's 'silence and babble as a function of the politics of presence' and the French modernist representation who hears this as 'a function of the metaphysics of absence'.<sup>61</sup> In advancing a theory of poetics that is mediated by the ear, she suggests that the poets have developed a means of circumnavigating criticism by uniting these disparate elements in order to move between a politics of presence and a metaphysics of absence 'without being reducible to either'.<sup>62</sup>

Janus's article sees this binary opposition as a way forward, past the modernist crisis that resides in the breakdown between subject and object. Of particular interest in Janus's article is the analogy she takes from Beckett of the self as the tympanum which appears in the *Unnameable*:

...perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating. I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either...<sup>63</sup>

Beckett's image of the self is expressed as the 'feeling' that exists between mind and world, sound and movement. The tympanum, the middle ear, is not the sound or movement itself but what these feed back to the 'space' it inhabits somewhere in-between. The use of the term 'vibrating' to describe the self instils a sense of moving between two states or extremes, to be continually fluctuating. This

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<sup>60</sup>Adrienne Janus, 'In One Ear and Out the Others: Beckett. . . . Mahon. Muldoon', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30 (2007), 180-196.

<sup>61</sup> Janus, p.180

<sup>62</sup> Janus, p.184.

<sup>63</sup> Janus, p.180.

fluctuation is, as Janus's article suggests, often acoustic, allowing the poets to maintain a form of connection, literary and historical, that does not detract from the end result. Sound becomes a principle organising force, forging patterns and presence to develop a sense of form and flux through which the self is 'felt'. This is constantly battling against recurrent images, their residual historicity and plurality effectively pulling the text back and forth through the tympanic space of Beckett's self. The self 'vibrating' mimics this constant restlessness in the poetry of both Mahon and Muldoon and is central to understanding how both poets generate the sense of the a past refigured in the present, through aspects of rhyme, repetition and return, whether figurative, thematic or both. In the case of Muldoon, the most frequent instances of intertextuality are those that involve rhyme and his version of the Tithonus myth is no exception.

Muldoon's more recent version of the myth demonstrates his capacity to maintain a state that, like the Beckett's tympanic self, is never resting. Again entitled 'Tithonus', sound is the central organising force of Muldoon's poem, which adheres to a strict rhyming pattern, a pattern that reproduces itself across entire stanzas. In the case of this poem, each line of the first and last stanza rhyme and the poem works inwards, demonstrating the familiar concertinaed effect already touched upon with his elegies. The effect across the quatrains is of something being condensed, squeezed into a form that can only be clearly seen once the entire poem has been scanned. The poem negates its content from the first line, 'Not the day-old cheep of a smoke detector on the blink'. It continues in this vein until the final two lines of the last stanza, concluding with 'but what turns out to be the two-thousand-year-old chirrup/of a grasshopper'.

The poem adopts the 'fabled and fantastic' form suggested by Kerrigan, offering a journey through a diminished literary and mythical past that never quite finds a way into the present. Untold stories spanning several generations of grandfathers are interspersed amongst a narrative that moves swiftly from one generation to the next as the poem shifts from one time, space or place to another without resting. Of the three poets, Muldoon's 'Tithonus' returns to the heart of the term allusion, 'to play' and this is how Muldoon's myth of Tithonus and the other texts that appear throughout the poem are to be understood. The sense of play is evident from the form the poem takes. The poem has no full stops and is

predominantly made up of run-on lines that mimic the slipperiness of the content, its continual negation moving the poem forwards but not telling the reader anything, not giving any sense of the purposely raised allusions or the returning sounds that are paradoxically present and absent throughout the entire poem. As Derek Attridge has pointed out, the 'phrasal movement...of a poem is the experience the reader has of moving towards points of arrival or away from points of departure'.<sup>64</sup> Muldoon's poem resists interpretation by constantly shifting the focus without allowing any closure to take place throughout the poem. Attridge identifies four types of phrasal movements, these are statement, extension, anticipation and arrival. Muldoon's 'Tithonus' plays off the first three movements without ever reaching the fourth. Semantically, the poem never arrives at a conclusion and can therefore never obtain any closure. Only through an adherence to form is there any sense of 'completion'.

In addition to the obscure textual allusions, at a syntactic level the poem is impenetrable. The generational shifts make it difficult to connect one stanza to another, other than using the rhyming scheme to do so. The diction is often obscure or misleading. 'Whittering' appears to be a mixture of 'whit' which is a short, abrupt sound and 'wittering', which denotes a chatter or mumble. The mix of these two would be 'whitter' which again refers to alcohol. Muldoon's lexical choice of 'whittering' is to ensure that all these interpretations are covered in a single phrase, thereby ensuring maximum 'productivity' or potential from the word and the poem as well as maximum confusion.

Sound, in fact, is the more reliable element of the poem, ultimately pointing out the very deceit at its heart. The stanzas are alive with sounds: from the 'day-old cheep' of the first stanza to the birdlike 'my sweet, my sweet', of the second. The sounds also 'fill in' the missing historical content with sometimes invented and seemingly nonsensical phrases that serve to fuel the strict rhyming pattern of the poem. The 'jinkle-jink' of the great-grandfather's money rhyming with the 'spur-spink' of the great-great grandfather unseated in battle. 'Jinkle-jink', makes the reader aware of the subtle deceit he or she is being subjected to, a

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<sup>64</sup>Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). p.209.

sense already imparted through the ‘drowsy syrups’ of the first stanza. ‘Jinkle’ appears in the Oxford English Dictionary as a diminutive of ‘jink’, which has several meanings. The first is to indulge in antics at drinking parties, a sense again played off from the beginning of the poem with the ‘drowsy syrups’, the ‘apothecary chest’ and the medicinal whiskey. It also means the ‘act of eluding someone or something, a quick turn’ in particular one made to elude a pursuer, to trick, cheat or swindle and finally, to make a short metallic sound’.<sup>65</sup> Acoustically though, it is also the process it describes, the ‘jinkle-jink’ an echo and diminution of the very words it presents.

Again, the reader is being tricked. Content is negated before it is established, the ‘Not the’, ‘what used to be’, ‘nor’ moving the poem forwards only in respect of what it is not. In this context any allusive content is resigned to the status of being, but of not being relevant. The opening allusion, the ‘drowsy syrups’ comes from Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Plotting the placement of Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s house, Iago ends his soliloquy claiming, ‘Not poppy nor mandragora/Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world/ Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep/Which thou owed’st yesterday’.<sup>66</sup> Muldoon in fact, often deploys an overt form of allusion like Tennyson and Mahon by highlighting passages for the reader, but the quotations are often obscure, or negated and therefore act as discarded possibilities that only serve to tell the reader what the poem is not.

As with so many of Muldoon’s poems, the image of the horse becomes central to ‘Tithonus’. It appears in the central stanza and again in the reference to Frank as well as being visibly and aurally scattered throughout the diction of the poem, with ‘spur-spink’, ‘stirrup’ and ‘cropper’:

nor the jinkle-jink  
of your great-grandfather, the bank teller  
who kept six shots of medicinal (he called it ‘therap-  
*utraquist*’) whiskey like six stacks of coppers

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<sup>65</sup> OED

<sup>66</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). p. 128.

stacked against him by the best  
 and brightest of the American Numismatic  
 Society from the other side of 155<sup>th</sup> Street,  
 nor the in-the-silence-after-the-horse-avalanche

spur-spink  
 heard by your great-great-grandfather, the Rebel yeller  
 who happened to lose a stirrup  
 and come a cropper

at the very start of the Confederate offensive in the west.

[HoL, 22]

The image of the horse is combined with that of a natural and unpredictable phenomenon, the avalanche. This not only connects to the 'whyte' and 'blanche', the presence of an avalanche suggests a potential instability, a surface liable to collapse in on itself at any moment. This is the one point in the poem in which the image, that of the horse, is combined with that of silence, and of silent collapse.

Muldoon's 'Tithonus' offers a comic representation of the myth, but it also offers a parable on the very questions the reader or critic ask of it, namely, what, if anything, can be made of the poem? Muldoon's short poem offers only the returning sounds as echoes of lost generations of literary and historical connections, consciously drawing the reader to the fact that he is 'playing' with the past in order to show how it is transformed in the present. Whilst his inclusion of intertextual forms may appear to be nothing more than the *act* of playing them out, viewed in relation to Muldoon's collections more broadly, they raise continuing and evolving questions in his work that engage the *act* in dialogues on the significance and intent of the poet, thus perpetuating questions on these very points. Muldoon's 'deep-seated senses' are intricately connected to this process, as he returns to intertextual forms to open up the poem to the different interpretations that arise as a consequence. In so doing, Muldoon is foregrounding the experience of the poem *and* what it asks on several discursive levels simultaneously. As Longley notes, 'Parable heightens a poetic dimension in order to deepen a moral one'.<sup>67</sup> In Muldoon's poetic, the either/or is replaced

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<sup>67</sup> Longley. p.243.

with the either/and, taking the process of reading and interpretation into the realm of the poetic.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In their own way, both poets are asking the same question: whether there is anything beyond the form that remains. Whether the 'blank page' woven of wood nymphs, or the Goddess who resigns the reed cutters to their icy 'jissom',<sup>68</sup> the eviscerated remains of the figures invoked, mythical or historical, inhabit the border between substance and spirit, existence and extinction as language questions the forms that remain. As Muldoon comments, 'the image of a critically positioned figure...who is neither here nor there, at some notional interface, may be traced....to some deep-seated sense of liminality that was, and is, central to the Irish psyche'.<sup>69</sup> The liminal figures Muldoon and Mahon choose to return to represent a complex engagement with mythical and historical forms as both diachronic images that contain the remains of past usage and the transformation of these in the poet's present to allegorical, schematic and acoustic echoes of a shared inheritance. In this way they border a space that is neither one nor the other, developing figures, texts and forms that move imperceptibly between past and present, historic and mythic, self and other.

Metamorphosis becomes synonymous with a sense of exile, or as Haughton aptly claims, a 'metaphysics of exile'<sup>70</sup>, but it also becomes a questioning of the limits and consolations of poetry, particularly given the way in which both poets incorporate visions that fluctuate from playful to moving or disturbing. Despite the playfulness of Muldoon and the lyrical beauty of much of Mahon's poetic *oeuvre*, what survives is an anxiety and a reality that both poets try to answer, repeatedly looking to past forms to find in their own work the 'aetiological narrative' or metaphysical landscape that will translate the human condition to a form that can be felt and understood through countless generations to come.

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<sup>68</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary has an entry for 'jism', meaning 'energy, strength' or 'sperm'. It does not have an entry for 'jissom'. See OED.

<sup>69</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland*, I. p.8.

<sup>70</sup> Haughton, p. 153.

What becomes increasingly clear in the later work of these poets is the move away from a clear distinction between experience and understanding as both poets continue to develop a form in which to experience language *is* to understand it.

### 3. The Art of Poetry: Ekphrasis and Revision in Derek Mahon

Interviewing Derek Mahon in 2000, Eamon Grennan questioned the fragments of autobiography that appear in Mahon's poetry and asked if he could explain how these elements fitted together. Grennan's list consisted of the child born during World War II, the bombings of a city, the growth of sexual awareness and the 'epiphanic bike' of 'Autobiographies'. Mahon's response offered the following explanation:

They all have Joycean mnemonic contexts: the bike, the girls' names, the war. When I think about the war, I think of a 1940s radio set, wireless set, and other objects with their inherent numina: a Japanese lacquered cigarette case bought back by an uncle in the Merchant Navy—the little things that you saw with a child's eye when you were a child and that will never go away. That is what consciousness is all about. My Aunt Kathleen's white shoes in a rented summer house in 1945. No, I was on the floor, it must have been 1942: I was on the carpet. Those white shoes! I imagine what I call that 'strange child with a taste for verse' emerges from a slow consciousness of the numina inherent in these things. <sup>1</sup>

Mahon's response to Grennan both prioritises and problematises the visual world, claiming it as the source of personal and public memories whilst encoding these memories within the uncertainty of external forms. His understanding of consciousness as the 'numina inherent' in the objects and places around him is part of a larger recurring concern in his poetic with art, in particular, of the relationship between history and aesthetics. He also illustrates several important aspects of his relationship with the visual. The first is the centrality of visual form in constructing personal and public histories, the second is the way in which

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<sup>1</sup> Grennan, 150-178. p.154.

Mahon continually returns to the aesthetic as subject and object of his poems, making and re-making his own 'visions' in response to his developing consciousness.

This chapter will explore both aspects of Mahon's poetic, turning first to an example of ekphrasis to show the way Mahon uses it to construct a dual perspective on the self that reflects personal and public histories simultaneously. As part of this process the chapter will show how Mahon constructs and deconstructs his own forms, extensively revising his ekphrastic poems to generate a poetry that is continually responding to the poet's consciousness and his continued dialogue with aesthetics. The focus will be on Mahon's use of ekphrasis to develop historical dialogues on form. This is an evolving facet of his poetic that produces dialogues on a number of levels, personal, cultural and historical, allowing Mahon sufficient proximity to, and freedom from, the objects he presents in order to engage with questions of the self.

### 3.1 'Courtyards in Belfast': Revising the ekphrastic tradition

According to James Heffernan, ekphrasis is 'the verbal representation of a visual representation' and a form that generates an inherent 'antagonism' from the movement between these two modes of representation.<sup>2</sup> Mahon's use of it connects to a tradition that charts a long course from the shield made for Achilles in the *Iliad*, or the Grecian Urn of Keats's ode to more recent examples, such as Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli'. It is a genre well documented by critics and philosophers, from the earlier works of Gotthold Lessing, whose essay on the limits of painting and poetry became a seminal work for successive explorations of ekphrasis, to more recent theories that question and extend upon Lessing's findings.<sup>3</sup> In critical

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<sup>2</sup> Heffernan, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984). Lessing argued for a distinction between poetry and painting based on the fact that poetry offered a representation in time whilst painting offered a representation in space. Heffernan's more recent work on ekphrasis explores the 'antagonism' created in a poem through the movement between description and narration. Heffernan questions Lessing's findings, taking his approach from William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

works past and present it continues to be the subject of intellectual enquiry for the profound ambiguity arising from the description of one art form in terms of another. It has also been described as a 'major intellectual industry' most of which has historically generated comparative works that question the relation of a specific text to a specific work of art.<sup>4</sup> Much of this has critiqued Lessing's seminal work on ekphrasis which viewed poetry predominantly as a representation of time and painting as a representation of space.

Mahon offers a view of poetry that transgresses these traditional boundaries, developing poems in which the space of and in the poem is integral to its experience. It therefore takes account of issues of time and space simultaneously. As the response to Grennan suggests, his interest in the visual takes a view of the image as an intimate conveyor of the remembered self, one that echoes with the past life of forms. Whilst Mahon offers no further explanation to Grennan of *how* it does so, he has expressed his interest in the architectural philosophy of the poetic imagination expressed by Gaston Bachelard in which the object 'houses' memories of the self. In a recent interview he described Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, claiming that 'it's just my kind of thing. All about resonance and situation, who you are, rooms and houses and spaces and how they relate to place'.<sup>5</sup> Bachelard's philosophy is of interest for the way in which it links memory to what he terms 'felicitous' or 'eulogised' spaces. The house is one such space, which according to Bachelard has become 'a topography of our intimate being' and a 'tool for analysis of the human soul'. This sense of a 'eulogised' space is connected to any structure that shelters or shapes the lived experience. Other similar spaces discussed are shells, nests and drawers. This space occurs through the 'veritable awakening of poetic creation....through the reverberations of a single image'.<sup>6</sup> These reverberations however, are just the

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<sup>4</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Wroe, 'A Sense of Place', *The Guardian*, Saturday 22 July 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview11> [accessed 27 October 2011].

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). p.xxiii.

starting point for a transformation, or for what Bachelard terms a ‘resonance-reverberation’ effect between the image and the transformation of that image in the poetic imagination:

After the original reverberation, we are able to experience resonances, sentimental repercussions, reminders of our past. But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface. And this is true of a simple experience of reading. The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us....It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being.<sup>7</sup>

It is this aspect of Bachelard’s work that helps to explain how Mahon understands the object as a conveyer of personal or public histories. If as Bachelard suggests, the effect of the image is both a dimension in space (reverberation) and time (resonance) the relation of the image to memory becomes a dynamic in which one is returned and realised in the other.

Understanding how this is possible however, is only one aspect of engaging with Mahon’s ekphrastic poems. In addition to the concept of a ‘eulogised’ space that contains the characteristics of time and space, he adds the further complexity of continually and extensively revising his poems. This is another aspect of the use of space and time and one that is especially true of his ekphrastic poems, several of which undergo extensive revisions between collections that were published within a year of each other. This brings a new dynamic to his poetic, raising interpretative questions of *how* the self finds expression through the forms that remain, particularly as these are continually evolving and adapting across his poetic.

This can be understood through Mahon’s repeated return to questions of perspective. The two ekphrastic poems that have undergone extensive revisions between collection are ‘Courtyards in Delft’ and ‘Girls on a Bridge’. These were both based on paintings that were also repeatedly remade and revised by De

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<sup>7</sup> Bachelard, p.xxiii.

Hooch and Munch. Both artists painted versions of the same scene, some identical in content, others with variations on the figures within it. Both also offer paintings that connect to autobiographical detail. Munch based a number of his paintings on his experiences, as did De Hooch, whose paintings offered images of Delft, where he lived for part of his life.

De Hooch is known for his painting of courtyard scenes, often set alongside images of domesticity and the home in which the viewing perspective develops a dialogue between internal and external spaces. Munch's paintings similarly offer perspectives on space and time, equating distance in space to distance in time.<sup>8</sup> These examples offer Mahon a fitting analogy for a poet who is to attempt the same in verse. It also offers him the figurative space in which to do so. Detached from the present and placed amongst a representation of the past, Mahon's ekphrastic poems allows the poet sufficient distance from his own personal and cultural circumstances to develop narratives that connect with those circumstances. In effect, releasing the self into a past space and another dimension of form establishes a metaphysical connection between past and present, object and voice so that the poet is able to shift between forms of representation, whether literary, mythical or historical.

This is evident from his 1981 and 1982 publications. *Courtyards in Delft*. The 1981 collection of only 14 poems which contains three poems that draw directly upon pictures, 'Courtyards in Delft', an allusion to Pieter De Hooch's 1659, 'The Courtyard of a House in Delft', 'The Hunt by Night' to Paolo Uccello's 1465 'The Hunt in the Forest' and 'Girls on a Bridge' to Edvard Munch's 1900 painting of the same title. All of these poems have went through some form of revision from their first appearance in 1981 to their new incarnation in his 1982 collection *The Hunt by Night*. All three of the paintings also concern themselves with issues of perspective, a point that he refers to in the visual aspect of 'The Hunt' when he refers to the cries of the dogs in the hunt that are 'receding to a point/Masked by obscurities of paint'. Similarly in Munch's 'Girls on a Bridge' and 'The Scream' the images within the paintings are set in relation to

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<sup>8</sup> David Loshak, 'Space, Time and Edvard Munch', *The Burlington Magazine*, 131 (1989), 273-282. p.275.

vanishing points, of time or place. Mahon's choice of ekphrasis then, is concerned not only with the individual artist, but with the way in which these artists played with and adapted their visual perspectives to develop simultaneous narratives through their art.

This is apparent in 'Courtyards in Delft' ('Courtyards') a poem that self-consciously engages with these dimensions of ekphrasis. 'Courtyards' is one of Mahon's most discussed ekphrastic poems, since it draws attention to his sustained interest in questions of art, place, and perspective. Originally published in 1981, the poem appeared only a year later in Mahon's 1982 collection, *The Hunt by Night* with an additional final stanza. With the exception of this stanza, the poem remained unchanged between versions, opening with a description of Pieter de Hooch's painting, in which Mahon imagines speaking and reading into the scene in which the artist is painting. The proximity of voice and vision is established in the opening lines as Mahon animates the scene through the painter's visual medium, light, before continuing to add colour and contrast to the scene he describes. In the first stanza the courtyard and the objects within it come to life through a flurry of activity, 'pursue', 'thrifty', 'scrubbed' all contribute to the sense of movement and purpose in de Hooch's scene. This 'scene' soon finds itself incorporated in to the bleak vision of the poet's own composition however, as the poem moves from description to narration, transforming De Hooch's inanimate scene of domesticity and motherhood into a memorial that echoes the 'lost' Ireland of Mahon's childhood:

No spinet-playing emblematic of  
The harmonies and disharmonies of love;  
No lewd fish, no fruit, no wide-eyed bird  
About to fly its cage while a virgin  
Listens to her seducer, mars the chaste  
Precision of the thing and the thing made.  
Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste:  
We miss the dirty dog, the fiery gin.

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

As vividly mnemonic as the sunlit  
Railings that front the houses opposite.

I lived there as a boy and know the coal  
Glittering in its shed,

[HBN, 9]

Objects within the painting become ‘vividly mnemonic’, forming an association in Mahon’s mind to his own childhood, the ‘oblique light’ of the opening stanza connecting to the ‘afternoon lambency’ of Mahon’s memories in the final stanza. Growing up in working-class Belfast, Mahon’s ‘real’ past is linked to that of the Dutch protestant Courtyard scenes, a transformation that generates a displacement, a shift into a liminal space that suspends the self indefinitely between worlds. As Haughton points out ‘veldt’ and ‘gorse’, ‘relocate the domestic and aesthetic dialects’ in the poem, finding between the Dutch connotations of ‘veldt’ and the Irish ‘gorse’ a balance within the final stanza that returns the poem to a liminal zone that simultaneously includes and excludes both as possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Textually and visually, the poet is displaced.

Mahon mimics verbally what De Hooch’s painting represents visually, that of the co-dependency of public and private spheres, of the ‘thing’ in the world and the image in the mind. It also questions the poet’s capacity to comment on what lies beyond the known, situating the poet and the work of art in between aesthetic vision and political history. In so doing, the poem becomes a space that mediates between the opposing pull of artistic licence and political act. It situates itself on the boundaries of either possibility. Similarly, De Hooch’s painting withholds any unifying vision of Dutch life, purposefully suspending that vision between interior and exterior spaces. Discussing the artists’ response to war between 1650-1672, Gary Schwartz notes that de Hooch ‘did not draw a clear line between private and public spheres, between a civil and military society’ adding further that there is no ‘clear dichotomy between virtuous domesticity of the household and the loose morals of the outside, war-torn world.’<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Haughton, p.159.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Schwartz, ‘City Fathers as Civic Warriors, in 1648’, *Art, Guerre et Paix en Europe, Actes du Col- loque*, Musée du Louvre 1998, Paris, 1999. p.7. Quoted by David Kunzle, ‘The Soldier

This intermediary position is one that offers a view of Dutch life as diverse, discordant and continually between perspectives. As poet and critic J. H. Prynne notes, de Hooch's dutch interiors provide an 'implicit narrative of passing from one world into another', a narrative that refers to 'agency and lateral passage'.<sup>11</sup> The doorway in de Hooch's painting draws the eye through the house to the female figure standing by an open door. His painting offers a perspective in which the co-existence and blending of spaces modifies and adapts the perspective as the eye moves from the courtyard in the foreground to the figure in the distance. This movement is also one that moves from the image of the mother with her child who are facing towards the viewer to the girl who waits with her back turned inside the house.

This displacement in De Hooch, of private and public is mimicked in Mahon. His perspective is similarly withheld by a 'story' of his childhood as it comes to be realised through the temporality of De Hooch's painting. After all, the 'girl that waits' and the mother and child that advance into the painting will not wait forever. The moment is one that reaches the realisation of its own temporality and its own existence. This is met at the same time with the aspect of waiting and of the unassimilated 'something' beyond the horizon, whether political or personal, death becomes the unknown element figured through the images that remain. Two aspects collide here, of the poet's realisation of time and his loss of it and of the public measure of time that happens through the historicised event in the world.

This shift from one space to another is mimicked by Mahon in the opening two stanzas as he establishes a narrative with the painting that will come to represent aspects of his own childhood, his image of 'home' momentarily illuminated by the respective sense of attachment and isolation that these two contrasting images provoke. 'Courtyards' moves from outside to inside, a

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Redeemed : Art and Reality in a Dutch Province at War 1650-1672: Gerard Ter Borch in Deventer, *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, Verlag des Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminars der Philipps-Universität Marburg, (2000), pp. 269-298, p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Prynne, 'A Discourse on Willen de Kooning's *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*', Given at the de Kooning Symposium, Tate Gallery, London, Friday 5 May 1995, pp.34-73, p.34-35.

movement that is followed by a shift from description to narration. The repetition of 'no' at the end of the first stanza seamlessly connects Mahon's description to his narrative voice. The effect of this is to negate the scene, the 'no', 'thing', 'nothing', which hold and combine to create a surface full of images that blend acoustically and associatively, raising an inevitable sense of interdependency within the form that remains. It is a transition that is reinforced textually, through extensive use of repetition and internal rhyme that serve to mimic the liminal space in between vision and voice in which the young Mahon is 'lying low'. Moving back and forth visually and textually, the poet becomes part of both and neither spaces simultaneously.

The effect of Mahon's narrative is that space and time become indistinguishable, such that the framing of the self within 'Courtyards' becomes a representation of representation, a conscious act of placing the self outside 'real' time in order to allow it to reflect on its place in time. The boundaries of individual and community are here confused, and as Mahon's subsequent stanzas demonstrate, this allows both greater freedom and anonymity, but also the inevitable loss of the individual. The movement is one from image to imagination, but also one of description to rhythmic oblivion. As the poem passes from one image to the next, the rhythmic return of syntax mimics the 'harmonies' and 'disharmonies' that chime their way through internal and end rhymes before coming to rest at the end of the third stanza on the passageway through the house. At this point, Mahon takes the poem past the waiting figure to the 'sunlit railings' of the houses that link the real passage of time in the poem to that of the imaginary expanse beyond de Hooch's perspective. Both poem and painting offer a space beyond representation, in which the hopes and anxieties of the human can only be realised in the imaginative afterlife of the forms that remain. Mahon is also offering a choice of perspectives, and the poem and the painting can be viewed either as an affirmation of the aesthetic or a displacement of it. This ambivalence is increased by the addition of a further perspective, which followed Mahon's revisions between 1981 and 1982.

His revisions in *The Hunt* show a movement away from the aesthetic to engage with the historical circumstances in Northern Ireland through the inclusion of an additional stanza. This re-frames the original, forcing the poem into the

violence of myth to enact a further transformation. The introspective self of the 'strange child' returns a communal voice in the final stanza, suspended indefinitely amidst the threat of a darker, insidious and unspoken force that spreads across the surface as the poem draws to a close:

For the pale light of that provincial town  
 Will spread itself, like ink or oil,  
 Over the not yet accurate linen  
 Map of the world which occupies one wall  
 And punish nature in the name of God.  
 If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,  
 Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,  
 We could sleep easier in our beds at night. [HBN, 10]

This later version of 'Courtyards' overwrites the aesthetic perspective of the earlier and with it the focus moves from an internal to an external perspective as the images connect to the narrative voice. Mahon reverts to synecdoches of cultural conflict in the map, the 'fire and sword' and the Maenads all of which move voice and vision towards an evocation of war. This same movement results in a shift from an imagined community to a mythical, boundless and conditional elsewhere. The natural landscape of 1981 is transformed to a mythologized setting. How then, is this change of perspective to be understood?

Critics have interpreted this final stanza politically, drawing in particular on the 'colonial anxieties' of the poem and of the way in which de Hooch's Protestant work ethic resonates with the 'backyards of Belfast'.<sup>12</sup> Discussing the final stanza, Rui Carvalho Homen links the metaphor of expansion to war, claiming that the associations with a new cartography suggest colonial expansion and the remapping of a territory in blood.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in an extensive critique of

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<sup>12</sup> Rui Carvalho Homen, 'Of Furies and Forgers: Ekphrasis, Re-vision, and Translation in Derek Mahon', *New Hibernia Review*, 8 (2004), 117-138. Haughton also discusses the connection between Mahon's Protestantism and de Hooch's painting. See Haughton, p.158.

<sup>13</sup> Carvalho Homen, p.129. The map does not appear in the painting by De Hooch, although they do appear repeatedly in Dutch paintings of the period, as David Kunzle notes when he questions whether they represent not just geography, but 'the honour and independence of the homeland'. They frequently appeared in the work of the most famous Dutch artist of De Hooch's time,

this poem Haughton draws the eye back to Mahon's Protestant background. The additional stanza, Haughton claims, brings out the 'sublimated violence' of the original, registering a 'violent recoil from the obsessively ordered Protestant ethos identified in the painting'. Mahon's removal of this stanza is again seen in political terms as an acknowledgement that no matter how oppressive the Protestant ethos of the painting, the 'Maenads might represent something worse in the context of the terror campaigns that were ongoing at the time of writing'.<sup>14</sup>

These critical perspectives are borne out by Mahon's explanation of the revision. Discussing the additional final stanza with William Scammell in 1991, he commented that 'Courtyards' was 'about Protestantism', continuing by adding that 'I tried to be too explicit with a fifth stanza and succeeded only in being inept'.<sup>15</sup> Despite Mahon's perceived inadequacies of the 1982 version, the revisions to 'Courtyards' and to the other ekphrastic poems in this collection suggests the poet's unease and his sense of dissatisfaction with the 1981 version at the time of re-writing. As well as the addition of further revisions to both 'Courtyards' and 'Girls on a Bridge', in 'The Hunt by Night' Mahon replaced 'sylvan excitements' with 'diuretic depots', a definite movement from the aesthetic transcendence of the original to the soiled humanity of the later version and with it a move from the isolated 'I' of these poems to the encompassing 'we' of the later versions.<sup>16</sup>

Moving beyond 'Courtyards' however, the changes to 'Girls on a Bridge' shows a shift in the opposite direction, away from the community and back to the individual. If Mahon's only interest was in revising the poems to show his response to the political climate, these changes would show a consistent move

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Vermeer, whose paintings are littered with cartographic references, in particular maps and globes. These objects are symbolic of the scientific advances of the day and of a golden age of mapmaking. See David Kunzle, 'The Soldier Redeemed. Art and Reality in a Dutch Province at War 1650-1672: Gerard Ter Borch in Deventer', *Marburger Jahrbuch Für Kunstwissenschaft*, 27 (2000), 269-298. p. 293.

<sup>14</sup> Haughton, p.159.

<sup>15</sup> Scammell, 4-6. p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Noted by Terence Brown. See Terence Brown, 'Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting', *Irish University Review*, 24 (1994), 38-51. p.50.

back towards the community and away from the idealised internal landscape of the aesthete. This is not the case however, as the later version of 'Girls on a Bridge' is revised to show a move away from the communal voice to that of the detached individual. The four stanzas that appear in the 1981 version offer a stark rendition of the future in which there are no trouts or midges to evoke the tranquillity of the opening scenes or to disturb the dead. The voice of the poet is internal to the vision:

The girls are dead,  
 The house and pond have gone.  
 Steel bridge and concrete highway gleam  
 And sing in the arctic dark; the scream  
 We started at is grown  
 The serenade

Of an insane  
 And monstrous age. We live  
 These days as on a different planet,  
 One without trout or midges on it,  
 Under the arc-lights of  
 A mineral heaven;

And we have come,  
 Despite ourselves, to no  
 True notion of our proper work,  
 But wander in the dazzling dark  
 Amid the drifting snow  
 Dreaming of some

Lost evening when  
 Our grandmothers, if grand-  
 Mothers we had, stood at the edge  
 Of womanhood on a country bridge  
 And gazed at a still pond  
 And knew no pain.

[CD, 25]

The world Mahon envisages in these last stanzas is a post-war world. The scream of the sixth stanza is picked up again in the seventh, transforming 'somebody screams' to a 'serenade/Of an insane/And monstrous age'. Art becomes inextricably bound to the new age, but in so doing, it has also become more ambiguous, leaving the artist, with 'no true notion of our proper work'. The text is left to 'wander', 'drifting', it is 'dreaming', 'lost' a sense of the stultifying

effects of modern age finding expression through the transformation of the 'lake' of the first few stanzas to a 'pond' creating a feeling of stagnation, stasis. As this re-appears in 1982, the removal of the last four stanzas results in a movement away from the historicised earlier version to a highly aestheticised later version in which the tragedy of humanity is realised with a transformation from Munch's vision of *The Girls on the Bridge*, to that of the *The Scream*:

A ghastly sun  
Watches in pale dismay.  
Oh, you may laugh, being as you are  
Fair sisters of the evening star,  
But wait - if not today  
A day will dawn

When the bad dreams  
You hardly know will scatter  
The punctual increment of your lives.  
The road resumes, and where it curves,  
A mile from where you chatter,  
Somebody screams...

[HBN,32]

As 'Courtyards' moves closer to a historicised space, 'Girls on a Bridge' moves further away from it. The mythological elsewhere of the longer version is returned to the aesthetic here, as Mahon returns the focus to the work of art. The artists work permeates not only in the title, but the main body of the text. The effect in the collection is not only as Haughton suggests, a subliminal awareness of the 'excluded possibilities' these revisions give rise to, but the sense of a continually shifting and resistant counterbalance. Mahon is offering examples of a perpetually evolving perspective. This sense of unrest and of not resting is integral to *The Hunt*, offering a collection in which form is an organic component of poetic expression, not just a formal structure to be filled.

In effect, 'Girls on a Bridge' becomes an ekphrastic poem filled with ekphrasis, ending with a verbal representation of the 'the scream' that immediately calls *The Scream* to mind. In form and content then, it concerns itself with the work of the artist, using ekphrasis and revision as subject and object of his poem. Mahon offers a self-conscious dialogue on aesthetics that writes the self into the poem, revising the voice and the perspective between versions,

asking the reader to ask the same questions of these revisions that the poet has asked himself. One way Mahon achieves this is in the act of remaking. Like de Hooch and Munch, the revised poem stands in for a space of time only, one that the poet knows will be subject to change, whether at his own hands or that of another. This is evident in his continued return to the artist, as well as his or her art, and his extensive allusions to the work of art or the artist in the text of his own poems. The return to a sense of perspective therefore takes on the dual dimensions of a personal perspective and a historical perspective. Mahon mimics the space/time dimensions of art with a space/time dimension in poetry that reverberates not only with the image returning across time, but with the added connection of these qualities to issues of cultural and personal development. Space and time are historical, but they are also personal and Mahon's poetic shows the poet striving to find a form that accommodates both of these perspectives as they impact on his consciousness.

The effect is the transformation of personal and cultural experience into a representative and resistant historical landscape. The dedication of the 1982 collection to J.G Farrell confirms Mahon's movement towards a poetic in which his poems reflect the changing environment through their representation of it, whether this is later deemed to be 'inept' or not. Farrell's 1970 novel *Troubles* demonstrates a similar use of decaying forms, set in a crumbling hotel in Wexford that seems to suffer further decline as the Irish War of Independence escalates in the background. Mahon commented in 1979, 'I lost my heart to *Troubles*' continuing by stating that 'there is nothing meretricious or merely topical about Farrell's work; it has the detachment and repose of great art. Which is not to say that it lacks humanity'.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of Mahon's interest in Farrell should not be underestimated. Mahon wrote two articles on him in the 1970's, one that describes the writer's 'small flat off the Brompton Road' in detail, drawing on Farrell's home and background as a means of framing his work. The second, an obituary, written the year Farrell was tragically killed and swept out to sea in a

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose*, ed. by Terence Brown (Old Castle, County Meath: Gallery Press, 1996). p.210.

fishing incident.<sup>18</sup> This second piece also frames the writer before continuing with the obituary as a man whose publications ‘enabled him to retire from his little flat in Egerton Gardens, SW3, to a farmhouse on the shore of Bantry Bay’. These descriptions are of no consequence for the reader, but for Mahon they frame the writer, placing him within a specific geographical location and connecting this with the ‘historical reconstructions’ and ‘comic masterpiece’ of Farrell’s work.<sup>19</sup>

These examples from Mahon’s journalistic prose demonstrate his own interest in the concept of home as both real, imaginary and conceptual spaces in which the artist searches for an expression that, as will be seen in chapter three is able to capture the emotional intensity of the poet responding to his immediate environment. Discussing *Troubles*, Mahon returns to Farrell’s description of the hotel, noting the way in which the building ‘wilfully surrenders itself bit by bit to the encroachments of the natural world’. This sense of decay, but also of an ‘surrender’ to an organic form is mimicked through the characters that inhabit the building. As Mahon notes, ‘servants and guests doze quietly at all hours of the day. Conversation is fitful and banal’, the inhabitants, like their surroundings, are detached from ‘real’ time. History rages in the background as ‘a different order of reality’ takes hold of the hotel and all those within it. He goes on to suggest that ‘in a curious feat of imaginative time travel Farrell seems to relive for us the lives of people whose names are obscured forever by the passage of generations, reminding us that ours too will be similarly obscured, there is no end, no resolution’.<sup>20</sup>

Like Farrell’s connection between the hotel and the people within it, Mahon’s ekphrastic poems offer a questioning of the moral fabric of contemporary poetry and of the poet’s ‘place’ textually, figuratively and formally within it. Place and poet are engaged in a continual dialogue between real and represented worlds. Personal memories and anxieties are transformed to the form

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<sup>18</sup> Derek Mahon, ‘The Distant Skylight’, in *Journalism: Selected Prose*, ed. by Terence Brown (Old Castle, County Meath: Gallery Press, 1996), pp. 205-209. Derek Mahon, ‘J.G. Farrell 1935-1979’, in *Journalism: Selected Prose*, ed. by Terence Brown (Old Castle, County Meath: Gallery Press, 1996), pp. 209-210.

<sup>19</sup> Mahon, *Journalism*, p.210.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208.

that remains in this way, his mental mapping of self to place one that he continues to question and re-write throughout his career in the metaphysical landscape through which the self is figured and transfigured as it moves between voice and vision.

'Courtyards in Delft' opens a collection that concerns itself throughout with the transfigured image in the textual and figurative decline that inhabits the poems throughout. The recurrence of diminished figures throughout the collection echoes the political climate of the time - a 'wasted' crone, a Norton that 'disintegrates', the abandoned Rathlin and Portrush, in addition to numerous adjectives of eviscerated space, 'empty', 'fades' 'starving', 'unbreakfasted', all hint at a more sinister and pervasive force, one that drives and questions the relation of the aesthetic to the historical and one in which the aesthetic reflects back the impoverished and penitent 'soul' of the artist.<sup>21</sup> Places are emptied out, artists and writers appear as ghosted remains within a landscape inscribed with change and uncertainty.

The forms that remain reflect the anxieties of cultural conflict but they also evolve directly from the poet's own influences and experiences as he develops and responds to the literary and historical environment. This is evident when looking at Mahon's early influences and on his developing poetic in which the body politic and the aesthetic form of his poems are integral to the poetic consciousness as it writes of the complexities of form. Mahon's use of ekphrasis is part artefact, part exemplar, using a historical questioning of aesthetics to develop and respond to his own experiences of life. This is evident from his earliest work in which Mahon takes texts or canvases from the past, both literary and theoretical, to develop his poetry and his sense of self.

### 3.2 'An urn full of explosives'<sup>22</sup>: Mahon's Historical Vision

The title of Mahon's pamphlet, *Design for a Grecian Urn*,<sup>23</sup> published in 1966 suggests the young poet's knowledge of and engagement with formalist ideas of

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<sup>21</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*. See pages, 11, 14, 15, 12, 11, 18 and 21 respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Grennan, 150-178. p.169.

poetry. It was written and published whilst Mahon was living in America in the mid sixties and exploring the poetry of John Crowe Ransom. Ransom published *The New Criticism*<sup>24</sup> in 1941, an exploration of the current approaches in literary criticism of that time practised by such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, William Empson and Yvor Winters. The 'new critics' were diverse in their approach and gathered together by Ransom as much to reflect the theoretical approaches of his time, as to advocate them. Yet whilst diverse, Ransom's book suggested a 'movement' that had interests in close reading and a unifying poetic that, like Coleridge's 'imagination', was able to hold and combine contradictory and discordant elements into a coherent whole. Mahon's developing poetic demonstrates an interest in the new critics, not only through the title of his first publication, but in the appearance of the Keats's 'well-wrought urn' in his subsequent works.

Keats's urn became the definitive formalist object following Cleanth Brooks's 1947 publication, *The Well Wrought Urn*. Brooks study offered a seminal critique of several poems, including a formalist explanation of perhaps the most famous ekphrastic poem in English literature, Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. His approach emphasised the importance of textual analysis and form over external knowledge arising from the poet's historical, cultural or personal background. Whilst acknowledging the need to focus on form Brooks was questioning whether 'a poem represents anything more universal than the expression of the particular values of its time'. His chapter on the Grecian Urn answers this indirectly, both through an analysis of the historical response to the poem from T.S Eliot and other critics, through to Brooks's acknowledgment that the poem is 'intended to be a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general'.<sup>25</sup> Keats's urn, as more recent critics have noted, provides writers with

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Mahon, *Design for a Grecian Urn* (Boston: Erato Press, 1966). Hugh Haughton touches briefly on Mahon's American publication. See Haughton, p.44.

<sup>24</sup> John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1947). p.155.

an indelible art object, one that has continued to engage and develop questions of aesthetics for successive generations.<sup>26</sup>

Mahon's awareness of the urn's significance and its influence on poetry is apparent from a talk given in 1987 in which he also dates the influence of the painter on poetry to Keats's Grecian Urn.<sup>27</sup> Its appearance in the title of Mahon's first publication as well as a subsequent allusion to it in *The Hunt* suggests that like his predecessor he engages with the poem both as a parable for art but also as a means of questioning the relation of art to history for the Irish poet. Whilst Mahon's inclination for a formally structured poem is evident from his early collections, he does not share the new critical view of the poet's cultural or personal experiences as extraneous to interpretation. In contrast to the new critic approach, Mahon's early poetry shows two prominent differences, the first is a movement towards an inclusion of autobiographical detail in the work of art and in particular the transformation of this detail to aspects of the poem; the second is the transformation of Keats's 'cold pastoral' from the imaginative and aesthetic realm of Keats's vision to the real and lived experience of the Irish writer.

The first of these saw the inclusion of autobiographical detail in Mahon's poems, particularly those that focused on a visual work of art or artist. Poems such as 'The Forger' and 'Van Gogh amongst the Miners' from *Nightcrossing* in 1968 are two such examples in which Mahon establishes a dialogue between the artist and his art. 'The Forger' is based on the real events of Han Van Megheren, a renowned forger of Vermeer's paintings, whose suffering for his art becomes the focus for Mahon's poem. The poem plays with ideas of originality and authenticity in art, particularly in relation to art that is purposefully derivative, grounding personal histories and narratives within the formal constraints of the work of art, as the poem concludes, 'I too have suffered/Obscure and

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<sup>26</sup> See Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). p.40. Leighton describes Keats's urn as an object that 'stands for that artistic difference and indifference which will trouble and intrigue writers for two centuries to come'.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Mahon, 'Poem and Picture', *The Irish Times*, 1987, p. 10 January. See Haughton, p.180.

derision/And sheltered in my heart of hearts/A light to transform the world.'<sup>28</sup>  
 Van Megheren's forgeries are born of individual suffering and financial need, creating stories from art that keep the passion and the artist alive.

Similarly, 'Van Gogh among the Miners', a poem dedicated to Belfast born artist, Colin Middleton, is a poem in which, like 'The Forger', Mahon explores the artist as a version or copy of a past version, weaving stories of past lives into the work of art. Whilst the poem takes Van Gogh as the focus for the poem, the dedication to Middleton and the poem's subsequent revival in Mahon's later collections as 'The Portrait of the Artist' brings the focus closer to home, framing lives within lives. This movement is beautifully demonstrated in 'The Portrait of the Artist', as the poetic 'I', whether Van Gogh, Middleton or Mahon transforms to the vision that remains:

In time I shall go south  
 And paint what I have seen-

A meteor of golden light  
 On chairs, faces and old boots,  
 Setting fierce fire to the eyes  
 Of sunflowers and fishing boats,  
 Each one a miner in disguise.

[CP, 23]

Mahon here gives a striking example of the translation of the artist into the exiled world of objects. In so doing, he has re-written memoirs from Van Gogh's life and work into the poem. The poem is based on autobiographical material, using letters from Van Gogh and his relatives. It takes as its source the young artist's move to Belgium in 1879 to become a pastor and his subsequent dismissal from this role for choosing to live amongst the miners. Using both physical movement through space, 'in time I shall move South/And paint what I have seen', Mahon maps the movement and life of Van Gogh from his life to his work, incorporating the allusion to Colin Middleton to develop an axiomatic relation between past and present artists and the transformation of societal and personal circumstances to the work of art. Of particular interest is the way in which Mahon transforms

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<sup>28</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems* p. 24.

biographical detail and the hardships of Van Gogh's early experiences into the transcendent visions of his later works, using iconic images of 'sunflowers', 'fishing boats', 'boots' and 'chairs' as enduring emblems of art inscribed with an individual's transformation from individual suffering to the beatified humanism of the closing lines. This transformation is one of personal and social anxieties to objects within the work of art that carry the experience of self, but it is also a transformation that in the final instance resists determination by withholding the 'real', choosing instead to close with the fictive world of the art object. The self is transformed through this process but it is also sustained through the forms that 'stand in' for the artist. This is frequently found in Mahon's poetry as he links artists and writers to their past through key characteristics of their life or work.

Returning to the second main difference to the new critical view of literature, Mahon purposefully grounds his works within real places, developing simultaneous narratives that resonate with literary, historical and personal significance. Early collections locate the poem within defined geographical and topographical spaces, spaces in which the cultural and personal experiences of the poet cannot be detached, or often extracted, from the structures they inhabit. This is evident in Mahon's return to Keats's emptied out town in 'Northwind: Portrush', in which a poem of place is viewed from the perspective of the community, not the aestheticised poetic eye. The poem alludes to Keats's 'Ode', asking the same question as Keats, but overlaying his imaginary town with the coastal resort of Portrush in Northern Ireland. The 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' asks:

What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. <sup>29</sup>

Mahon's allusion inverts Keats's perspective, looking at the object, in this case, Portrush, from outside. In doing so he inverts the vision and stands on the

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<sup>29</sup> Miriam Allott, *Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Miriam Allott, 7th edn (London: Longman, 1989).

periphery, surrounding it with the unknowable, as with Keats's vision, but in Mahon's poem the question of 'truth' or 'beauty' becomes the transformation of the urn into the artist's temporary stay against oblivion, that of art itself, and of the fragmented remains of the urn in the 'plaintive voice' that 'choirs now and for ever'. 'Northwind: Portrush' transforms the urn into the very fabric of his voice and his vision, 'eternity' 'sojourn', 'return', 'déjeuner', recalling the urn as temporary rests and breaks in the poem, answering Keats's original, not through the structured and impersonal vision of formalism, but through the transformation of the fragments that remain:

Then, from the ship we say  
 Is the lit town where we live  
 (Our whiskey-and-forecast world),  
 A smaller ship that sheltered  
 All night in the restless bay  
 Will weigh anchor and leave.

What did they think of us  
 During their brief sojourn?  
 A string of lights on the prom  
 Dancing mad in the storm -  
 Who lives in such a place?  
 And will they ever return?

[HBN,12]

As with 'Courtyards', the poem is problematised by its choice of perspective. The poet is looking at Portrush from an offshore vantage point, 'from the ship we say', not confirming whether this is a departure or a return, questioning the thoughts of visitors who are also onlookers of the deserted town, and of the deserted poem. Portrush is filled with 'stricken souls/No spring can unperturb'. The landscape that Mahon offers transforms Keats's threatening vision of the 'unravished bride' to the town of Portrush, creating an image of it that exists simultaneously as a 'real' and a mythical place of exile. Where Keats offers the assurances and consolation of the form that remains in the final lines of his 'Ode', Mahon envisages an 'eternity' filled instead with the 'plaintive voices' of exiled artists, who unlike Prospero or Lear, lament a 'real' place, that is both temporal and subject to the threat of aesthetic and historical change.

Shortly before the publication of *The Hunt*, Mahon had spent two years there whilst working at the University of Ulster in Coleraine. It is a place that has appeared both in an earlier poem and in his prose. In 1977, he wrote a piece for Magill magazine entitled 'The Coleraine Triangle' that reads almost as a description of space from a Farrell novel. Discussing the landscape of Portrush, the coastal town is inscribed with memories of the troubles, quite literally, although the impact of sectarian conflict does not seem to penetrate the consciousness of its inhabitants:

'This is one of the places where 'the troubles seem far away'. Security is slack; the Taigs keep a low profile, UVF rules OK. (It doesn't, actually; RUC rules.) Even so, that yellow glow to the west at night is not, as some would have it, the glow of Derry, but the glow of Magilligan with its arc-lights and watch-towers. And there are slogans on every wall. My own favourite, because of its weird poetry, is: *We shall never forsake the blue skies of our Ulster for the grey skies of an Irish Republic*. This has now been painted over, but I'm glad to have the opportunity of recording it here, because I think it throws an interesting light on the Ulster Protestant pathology'.<sup>30</sup>

Sectarian conflict occurs, it is written on the walls of the town, yet it is not 'real' in any sense to either Mahon or its inhabitants, since it happens out of time. As he concludes his article, 'Nothing happens here, and maybe nothing ever happened'. Like Keats's urn, Portrush exists outside history, it has attained, as Brooks notes of the original, 'myth as a valued perception into reality' and it has been made possible by the poet's perception of the place.<sup>31</sup> His allusion to Keats enables the move between the imagined landscapes of the urn and the real landscape of Portrush. This is a movement that transforms the ceremonial vase into a 'eulogised' space, the emptied out town a container that holds public and personal histories bound to the act of representation, regardless of whether there is anyone left to hear, or see it.

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<sup>30</sup> Mahon, *Journalism*, p.218.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, p.164.

What this tells the reader about Mahon is that he makes art out of life, but that in order to do so he develops his experiences into the matter of art, that is, art is made out of real landscapes. These landscapes whilst geographically locating the poem operate a simultaneous narrative, just like the visions of De Hooch or Munch, developing perspectives on the self and society that are played out in the movement between the poetic voice and its realisation in the pictures that remain.

His development of a poetry that visualises and questions the survival of the self through the play of verbal and visual form is a recurring element of his poetic *oeuvre*. This is a result of a number of influences, most notably that of Samuel Beckett and a number of modern French poets. Throughout the 1970's to the 1990's, Mahon wrote short prose pieces collected together in his 1996 publication, *Journalism*. These short pieces demonstrate a breadth of influence, incorporating reviews of translations from Charles Baudelaire, Yves Bonnefoy, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Phillippe Jacottet, Albert Camus and Paul Eluard, as well as articles that concern themselves with literary figures and philosophers such as Louis MacNeice, Samuel Beckett and Jean Paul Sartre. The collection dedicates longer pieces to Louis MacNeice, Samuel Beckett and J.G. Farrell, with many pieces in the collection demonstrating an interest in modern French poets. The engagement with issues of aesthetics is clear even in the shorter pieces and Mahon's continued movement between 'real' and imagined landscapes one that he admires in MacNeice, Beckett and Farrell as a source of expressive humanism and an affirmation of individual experience.

Of MacNeice's poetry Mahon notes the 'sensuous qualities of light and landscape', claiming that he 'had a painter's eye' forging a poetic in which the 'variety and vividness of landscape immediately suggest the variety and vividness of human personality and experience'. Whether dramatic or banal, Mahon claims that MacNeice 'latches on to ...the existential tingle of the passing minute'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in his articles on Beckett, the 'existential' aspect of Beckett's work appears again to interest him. In 'The Existential Lyric', he comments on the publication of *Collected Poems in English and French*, noting Beckett's disinterest in 'conventional reality or language as an instrument of representation'.

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<sup>32</sup> Mahon, *Journalism*, p.27.

Mahon draws attention to Beckett's early articles and reviews that talked of a 'rupture' in language, a 'metaphysical disjunction between 'subject' and 'object', between the perceiving sensibility and everything external to it'.<sup>33</sup>

Beckett's early critical pieces explore issues of consciousness from an existentialist perspective, paying particular interest in how meaning is lost in the fissure between mind and world. His 1934 essay 'Recent Irish Poetry' outlines this issue in more detail.<sup>34</sup> His article on Irish poets writing in the nineteen twenties and thirties divides them into 'antiquarians and others' depending on their awareness of a 'rupture of the lines of communication'. The few who are aware of this rupture, Beckett comments, 'may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects...as no-man's-land, Hellespont or vacuum, according as he happens to be feeling resentful, nostalgic or merely depressed'.<sup>35</sup> In developing his point, Beckett singles out Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey as the more interesting poets, tracing influences in their poetry back to Corbière, Rimbaud, and Laforgue, claiming that what is of importance in the work of these two poets is that 'it admits – stupendous innovation – the existence of the author'.<sup>36</sup>

Such existence refers to the poet's awareness of the dislocation between subject and object and of the degree to which the poets discussed incorporate this into their vision as a replacement or a disruption of traditional poetics. Mahon's return to Beckett in *Journalism* recognises his predecessor as a poet who made art out of the real internal landscapes of the mind and that concerned itself with the 'metaphysical disjunction' between subject and object rather than the social or cultural dialogues it contained. Whilst his own interest in Beckett's vision is not explicitly given, his articles clearly show an interest in the disjuncture between the lived experience and the resistance of language to it. This is evident from

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry', in *Disjecta Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), pp. 70-76. p.70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.70.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.76.

Mahon's allusion to *Waiting for Godot*, in which he claims Beckett's prose achieves 'the condition of music':

Estragon: All the dead voices.  
 Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
 Vladimir: Like sand  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
 Silence.  
 Vladimir: They all speak together.  
 Estragon: Each one to itself.  
 Silence.  
 Vladimir: Rather they whisper.  
 Estragon: They rustle.  
 Vladimir: They murmur.  
 Estragon: They rustle.  
 Silence.  
 Vladimir: What do they say?  
 Estragon: They talk about their lives.  
 Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.  
 Estragon: They have to talk about it.  
 Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.  
 Estragon: It is not sufficient.  
 Silence.  
 Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
 Vladimir: Like ashes.  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
 Long silence.

Mahon's choice of allusion to Beckett is a passage in which the dead are transfigured through the repetition of sound and images from the natural world.<sup>37</sup> The movement from verbal to visual form illustrates this shift as 'all the dead voices' become wings, leaves, ashes, feathers. The repetition of 'like' announces every image as a movement of meaning from the voice to the object presented, producing metaphors of the dead that only recall them through a continual movement between metaphors, hence paradoxically, not recalling them at all.

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<sup>37</sup> Mahon discusses this movement from the mind of the poet to its representation in the world in 'A Noise Like Wings: Beckett's Poetry', *Journalism*, p.53.

Mahon's choice of quotation is of interest for the sublimation of survival to the repetition and renewal of forms, but also for the way in which visual form also becomes a representation of verbal form as the dead 'rustle' and 'murmur', echoing the visual shapes they make through this interplay of sound and vision. The more traditional ekphrastic relation of a 'verbal representation of a visual representation' is here inverted, demonstrating a movement between voice and vision in which both dimensions develop the scene. It is also not antagonistic but sympathetic, the visual and verbal content playing off each other as another way of perceiving and recalling the dead. The interest for Mahon is the way in which Beckett plays with vision and sound to produce a passage such as the one given in which the final effect demonstrates the philosophical foundations that underpin it.

Hence, whilst Mahon does not wholly subscribe to Beckett's bleak vision, his choice of allusions in *Journalism* show an interest in his philosophical motivations, especially where these find expression through the visual realm. In particular, he draws on discussions with George Duthuit, in which Beckett proposes an 'inexpressive art', likening his own work to that of a Dutch artist. Beckett claimed that this 'inexpressivity' when recognised by the artist gave rise to 'a new occasion...of the act, which unable to act, obliged to act...makes an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation'.<sup>38</sup> His comment suggests that the *act* of expression and the awareness of the inherent problems it poses, is more important than the expression itself. Mahon continues in his discussion of Beckett by providing examples of this 'inexpressivity' as it appears in his work. Beckett's 'failure' to communicate is illustrated through an incident in *Watt*, in which the blind 'piano-chooner' stands in a sunlit room passing comments on Mr Knott's instruments. Quoting from the novel Mahon notes that 'for Watt the scene takes on a 'purely plastic content' and becomes an 'example of light commenting on bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound, and comment.'<sup>39</sup> He provides several further examples, referring to the 'soul landscape' of 'Addenda' as well as highlighting instances in *Waiting for Godot* concluding that they all share a 'highly pictorial quality'.

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust: Three Dialogues* (London: Calder, 1965). p.125.

<sup>39</sup> Mahon, *Journalism*, p.58.

It is this aspect of Beckett's 'inexpressivity' that Mahon develops in his own poetry, showing not an escape from the self into the work of art, but an expression of it through the artwork as instance and example of the philosophical and political impetus of the artist. The examples Mahon takes from Beckett are all instances in which voice and vision become integrated perspectives on the self. In Mahon's poetry however, this is frequently set against a historical background or figure, offering a parallel reading that sits alongside the voice and/or vision. In effect, Mahon's perspectives are arrived at through the 'other', his voice establishing a parallel dialogue on form that questions the act of representation as it gives voice to it.

In this respect, Mahon's poetry owes its greatest influence to the lasting impression of French poets, particularly Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valéry and the marriage of mind and matter that inflect their work and their philosophy. At an early stage of Mahon's development French literature served as a means of escaping the psychological confines of Belfast. Hugh Haughton touches upon this in his discussion of Mahon's earliest poems, claiming that Mahon's interest in the French language contributed towards the idea of a 'second' or poetic self.<sup>40</sup> At Trinity this is reflected in his choice to study English, French and Philosophy whilst also spending a year working in Paris as an '*auditeur libre*' at the Sorbonne. His sustained interest in French literature is evident from his reviews of translations in *Journalism* as well as his own translations of the works of Jaccottet, Baudelaire, Beckett, Rimbaud and Valéry that culminated in his 2006 publication *Adaptations*.

The extent of Mahon's French influence can be seen in collections such as *The Yellow Book*, in which the poet transports himself back to the French literary past in order to construct his present. *The Yellow Book* is inherently dialogic, demonstrating the co-existence of perspectives both in the translations that appear within it and in Mahon's choice of title. It takes its title from a London based literary magazine of the 1890's that had become a forum for an aestheticist movement influenced in particular by the French symboliste movement. Mahon's collection engages directly with advances in contemporary literary

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<sup>40</sup> Haughton, p25.

theory and the resulting difficulties this poses for the poet is given voice through the lens of the French aesthete. Throughout he consciously refers to literary and cultural developments, interspersing images of modern life and technological advancement with allusions to theoretical perspectives on art and literature that range from the deconstructionist cry for the death of the author to the ‘forest of intertextuality’ whilst also claiming in ‘Schopenhauer’s Day’ ‘the only solution lies in *art for its own sake*/redemption through the aesthetic’.<sup>41</sup> The poetic voice is afloat amidst a sea of voices, perspectives and allusions, none of which can be relied upon. As Haughton notes, even Mahon’s claims for ‘redemption through the aesthetic’ is interrupted with a vision of ‘historical nightmare’<sup>42</sup>, the philosophy of Schopenhauer replaced with the names of artists and writers that leave a chilling picture of a world at war:

Weimar, a foul Reich and the days of wrath,  
 a *Vogue* model in the dead director’s bath;  
 and the angel of history, a receding plane  
 that leaves the cities a rubble of ash and bone  
 while black soldiers tap-dance on my gravestone.

[CP, 233]

Yet whilst Mahon’s proclamation for ‘redemption through the aesthetic’ is interrupted by the final vision, the rhetorical power of these lines remains their most prominent feature, transforming historical events and journalistic sensationalism into a pictorial intensity in the final lines. As with Mahon’s earlier poems, it offers biographical detail on Schopenhauer and his philosophy subsumed within the historical and literary past, but it also integrates the aesthetic content with a visual instability that is echoed throughout the form of the poem and of the collection. Mahon’s relentless adaptations, revisions, allusions and repetitions threaten to destabilize the past and undermine the present, reflecting both the time at which *The Yellow Book* was written, but also Mahon’s present self as questions of aesthetic sensationalism reflect incongruously set against the backdrop of a violent and technologically advanced century.

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<sup>41</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 232.

<sup>42</sup> Haughton, p.285.

As with 'Courtyards', or 'Portrush', two perspectives collide in the poems throughout *The Yellow Book* as Mahon chooses to play with the uncertainty of voice that comes from two competing 'spaces'. This is made more difficult by his incorporation of literary, philosophical and cultural ephemera, placing the text against the backdrop of a movement that happened a hundred years before. The choice of Baudelaire is central to this collection, as Haughton notes, the 'forest of symbols' is an allusion Mahon takes from *Correspondances* and Baudelaire is also central to the placement and subsequent displacement of a sense of home that comes from the opening translation of his 'Paysage'. At this point in Mahon's career, revision and adaptation takes on a more subtle and complex relation, not only between voice and vision, but also between the relation of these parts to space, time and to the self.

Placing *The Yellow Book* of 1897 against that of Mahon's 1998 version, Mahon looks backwards to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, filling his poem with the detritus of the past 100 years of history that finds expression through the aesthetic pen of Baudelaire in turn writing over a hundred years before that. Baudelaire's 'Paysage' becomes the landscape of Mahon's existence as the century approaches. His choice of translation purposefully maintains the spatial qualities of the collection, 'paysage', literally means 'landscape'. The translation offers a visual plane on which Mahon inscribes the a narrative history of aesthetics against the figures of past writers and poets over the course of a century. The resulting effect is a collection in which the divergent aspects of a physical and of a philosophical landscape confront each other, across time and space, each raising questions about how the 'soul' of the poet can survive in such a landscape. As the image of 'real books' being 'rarities in techno-culture' are realised, Mahon 'nod[s]... from the pastiche paradise of the post-modern'. The directness of Baudelaire's poetry, and its sense of voice and vision is mimicked in Mahon's collection, not as a release from the world, but in order to reflect the anxieties of representation.

What he takes from Baudelaire in order to do so is the duality of perspective that comes from the co-existence of two voices, developing aspects of the 'second self'. This is attained in part through the 'translation' of the self into the physical qualities of language, but also through the more generic sense of

translation as an exchange between 'self' and 'other'. With regard to the physical qualities of language, Lee McKay Johnson has discussed the various components of symbolism in relation to Baudelaire, who was one of the founders of the symbolist movement. He argues for Baudelaire's development of a 'tangible language', one that was equal to the emotion produced when confronted with a painting. Baudelaire translates the directness and simultaneity of painting into his poetry, so that words are transformed from 'printed signs without value' to 'painted hieroglyphs'.<sup>43</sup> The two main aspects Baudelaire took from painting was a 'concrete' form of representation and the idea of the 'total unified form of a painting or a literary structure' that realised the idea of 'simultaneous perception'.<sup>44</sup> In order to achieve this effect, Baudelaire used the acoustic and visual resonances of words, namely colour, texture, sound, shape and 'image value' as opposed to their specific meaning to evoke the similar effect of that of the painting.<sup>45</sup>

These resonances of language in Mahon's poetry develop the pictorial aspects of his work, but unlike Baudelaire's transformation of these to a concrete form of representation, they mimic consciousness through a continual yet contained movement through a poem. Mahon's more recent collections, including his translations from other languages demonstrate the effect of this within the poem. Whilst this thesis will not concern itself with Mahon's translations from one language to another, the more generic sense of translation as an exchange between 'self' and 'other' is one that applies to his use of ekphrasis and revision as a translation of the self between internal consciousness and external vision.<sup>46</sup> In Mahon's poetry, the play of the visual and the verbal elements attains the 'condition of music' he admires in Beckett *and* the 'reverberation and resonance' through which the space of the poem becomes an expression of being.

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<sup>43</sup> Lee McKay Johnson, *The Metaphor of Painting: Essays on Baudelaire, Ruskin, Proust and Pater* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980). p.13.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, p.34.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, p.37.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Ricoeur's theory of translation incorporates two dimensions of translation, that of the linguistic movement between languages, but also of how translation occurs amongst self and other. See Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. by Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006).

This is evident across his poetry as it has developed in recent years, but it is most visible in his recent translation of 'Le Cimetière Marin', not because it is a translation as such, but because it is a poem that Paul Valéry has talked explicitly about as a poem that suggested a 'meditation by a particular *self*, translated into the poetic universe'<sup>47</sup>. Valéry started writing the poem in 1917 during a time of war. By his own admission, he was primarily concerned with the workings of his own mind and of how poetry could represent the complex feelings and emotions of his self through the poem. In 'Le Cimetière Marin' he demonstrates an indissoluble link between form and content in which sound recalls form. This is an altered state for Valéry, but one that successfully bridges the divide between the thought in the mind and its ability to take shape in the world:

...poetry requires or suggests a very different "Universe": a universe of reciprocal relations analogous to the universe of sounds within which musical thought is born and moves. In this poetic universe, resonance triumphs over causality, and 'form' far from dissolving into its effects, is at it were *recalled* by them. The Idea claims its voice. <sup>48</sup>

Valéry claims these 'relations' were instrumental in the development of 'Le Cimetière Marin', which started out as a 'rhythmic figure' that was decasyllabic in form.<sup>49</sup> The regular rhythm of Valéry's poem is evident from the opening lines:

Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes,  
 Entre les pins, palpite, entre les tombes ;  
 Midi le juste y compose de feux  
 La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée!  
 O récompense après une pensée  
 Qu'un long regard sur le calme des dieux!<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Denise Folliot (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958). p.150.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p.146.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p.148.

<sup>50</sup> *An Anthology of Modern French Poetry 1850-1950*, ed. by Peter Broome and Graham Chesters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). p.83.

A comparison of the first four lines of Mahon's adaptation shows that he veers only slightly from Valéry's decasyllabic structure. Whilst he is not able to maintain the pattern of rhythmic components exactly, where possible Mahon maintains the decasyllabic line. Additionally, where these components differ there is the feeling that this is purposely done. The first and last lines of verse one contain eleven syllables as opposed to ten, which returns to the repetition effects seen in many of Mahon's previous poems:

A tranquil surface where a spinnaker moves  
flickers among the pines, among the graves;  
objective noon films with its fiery glaze  
a shifting sea, drifters like dipping doves,  
and my reward for thought is a long gaze  
down the blue silence of celestial groves.

[A, 72]

Mahon's version of 'Le Cimetière Marin, whilst altered considerably, remains true to Valéry's original form in terms of the structural integrity of the original. It maintains a strong rhythmic form, incorporating extensive assonance, alliteration and internal rhymes, all of which reflect the sense of Valéry's original. In addition to the decasyllabic form, Valéry's original poem had a strict aabccb rhyming pattern, a pattern that Mahon's adaptation has veered from, however, as this first verse shows, Mahon deploys an integrated rhyming scheme, where end rhymes are variants of each other - moves/graves/glaze/doves/gaze/groves. All the end rhymes expand and contract in a way that resonates with the slightly asymmetrical decasyllabic structure, 'groves' contracting to 'gaze', 'glaze' expanding to 'groves', in addition to which the mirroring effects off the heavily assonantal 'oves', 'aze', and 'aves' connects each rhyme forwards and backwards throughout the verse. In this way, Mahon's verse has the effect of moving acoustically, whilst visually remaining still, rendering his adaptation with an effect that is simultaneously and harmoniously integrated acoustically, visually and psychologically, offering a moment of quiet contemplation that mimics the view of the sea from the cemetery.

Furthermore, ‘drifters like dipping doves’ is a phrase unique to Mahon’s version, the alliteration and assonance within the phrase replacing but maintaining the effect of Valéry’s ‘recommencée’, ‘récompense’, ‘pensée’ to produce a similar sense of an expanding and contracting verse that moves with the poet’s thoughts and connects with the natural surroundings. The use of ‘drift’ also extends the sense of being moved, blown or carried along by the scene, strengthening the sense of a passive movement being driven by a stronger external force.

Discussing the relation of sound to meaning in Valéry’s poem, Christine Crow suggests that he demonstrates ‘the capacity of sound to be meaning’, extending her argument further to suggest that the way in which ‘sound overrides the value[s] of words as separate entities’ is a process equal to that of the inner monologue of the conscious mind.<sup>51</sup> Sound enables the mind to unite the fragmentary processes involved in perception and thought to reach a place in which these elements unite.

Within Mahon’s adaptation of the original sound becomes an organising force, developing patterns that play abstract and concrete patterns off against each other in order to maintain the inexpressibility of concrete form against the opposing desire of the poet to translate these into a meaningful ‘state’. For this reason, the diction in Mahon’s version ‘*The Seaside Cemetery*’ mixes and mimics the objects within it, the profusion of fricatives, ‘f’, ‘sh’, ‘s’, ‘th’ producing a turbulent air flow that oscillates on frequencies resonant of ‘white noise’. White noise, emanating from natural sources such as the earth and the sun, maintain the transformational and numinous pull of Mahon’s adaptation, vibrating in and around objects. At the same time, the objects within the poem are heavily burdened with latent form and meaning, all of which contribute to the overall impact of the poem. Take the instance of ‘La scintillation sereine sème/Sur l’altitude un dédain souverain’, which translates to ‘The serene scintillation sows/on the altitude a sovereign scorn’. In Valéry’s line, the sibilants again hold the text together as well as retaining this form metaphorically, the use of ‘Sovereign’ in its first sense translating to ‘form’. As well as picking up this

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<sup>51</sup> Christine M Crow, *Paul Valéry and the Poetry of Voice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). p.211.

sense it connects to state, sovereign also relating to a recognised ruler and material wealth. In Mahon this is translated to 'the serene glare/sows on the depths an imperious disdain'. The 'sème', to 'sow', translates amongst other things to an 'illustration of forms', it is also a naturally regenerative term to signify the scattering of seeds on the ground, mimicking the phonemic scattering that occurs throughout the poem.

Mahon also retains the sense of a higher, or supreme ruler in 'imperious' maintaining abstract, yet human characteristics. This is important for the incremental effect of form and content in the poem, demonstrating the 'illustration of forms' through connecting with other 'forms' in the text. One that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter is that of the female. An example of this appears in the poem that demonstrates the relation of form to content. In stanza three of 'Le Cimetière Marin', Valéry evokes the goddess Minvera, 'Stable trésor, temple simple à Minerve/Masse de calme, et visible réserve' (Stable treasure, simple temple to Minerve/Mass of calm, and visible reserve). Valéry's evocation of the Roman goddess transmutes in Mahon's text to become 'Wide-open vault and chaste shrine to Athene/deep reservoir of calmly shining money'. Both Mahon and Valéry generate the sense of a 'place', or space where she exists through the inclusion of 'temple' and 'vault' whether this is the place of worship Valéry suggests or Mahon's darker burial chamber.<sup>52</sup> In this way, sound and image are interconnected with real and mythical time simultaneously in both poems, one blending almost imperceptibly into the other. The intricate acoustic connections in 'Le Cimetière Marin, maintain this state, resulting in a situation where sound and image are connected and 'suggest' form. The generative impact of the rhyme often results in the simultaneous existence of multiple possibilities within the form itself.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Mahon's use of ekphrasis and his repeated revisions, both of his ekphrastic work and his poems more generally suggest a movement towards an understanding of ekphrasis in the broader sense of the relation between the verbal and the visual

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<sup>52</sup> Grimal. p.67.

arts, with particular emphasis on the similarities between them as both struggle to translate their condition through the constraints of space and time.

The use of ekphrasis develops a questioning of this through Mahon poetry, his blend of personal and public histories offering a revision and transformation of past associations of poetry and its relation to the visual arts through a return to its very foundations. It does this in two distinct ways. Firstly, Mahon uses allusions to visual art to generate a dialogue between past and present uses of the genre and secondly, allusions play with the conceptual boundaries of image and word, forging a poetic in which language mimics the power of vision. In doing so the poet rivals the painter, creating a space with shape, depth and a sense of community. The poet generates the 'slow consciousness' of the 'numina inherent' in the image and objects that surround him, instilling them with visual qualities of self and community.

As a consequence, Mahon's ekphrastic poems demonstrate not the 'antagonism' of the genre as it has been understood historically, but a blend between image and word as component parts of an internal/external dialogue of the self that when artfully combined is capable of transmitting an emotional intensity more powerful than the medium of poetry or painting alone. As his career progresses, Mahon revises past texts, a comment on the power of the artist to do so, but also more importantly, a sign of a developing and maturing poet, one who moves back and forth between the Keatian concept of 'Beauty is truth and truth beauty' to advance a more contemporary understanding of the problems this poses for the contemporary poet. His re-working of ekphrastic poems also demonstrates the fine line between aesthetic oblivion and historical determinism. In making and remaking his own work, he demonstrates a restless consciousness, that moves from the romanticised images of the image figured to the restlessness of the historical voice as it makes and remakes the past in response to the present. This becomes progressively more constant in Mahon's poetic as his later collections move towards a vision of contemporary society in which the voice brings alive the beauty, atrocity and anxieties of its condition.

## 4. Harbours History – old for new in Derek Mahon’s *Harbour Lights*.

*The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths. The attachment to these when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination- in most cases, saving hallucinations. Writers followed the paths they saw or felt people treading, and depicted those little dear saving illusory worlds.<sup>1</sup>*

Written at the same time as the war on Iraq, Mahon’s 2005 collection, *Harbour Lights* is shot through with the tensions of past and present warfare, from the ‘Resistance Days’ of Jean Paul Sartre and Elizabeth Bowen in the second world war to the invisible dead of the first world war that haunt the text of ‘The Seaside Cemetery’. Overwhelmingly it is a collection in which ‘place’ resonates with the possible permutations of an intellectual, cultural, literary and personal sense of ‘home’ born of conflict and uncertainty. From the landscapes of wartime Paris and London to the coastal resorts of Sète and Kinsale where he now lives, Mahon extends his play with ekphrasis in light of the ‘media culture’ that permeates contemporary living, developing landscapes of war that permeate the collection figuratively and historically through a return to past responses of the artist in wartime.

The collection also sees a return once more to a highly visual poetic. Many of the poems in *Harbour Lights* refer to photographers or artists and where this is not the case, translated poems become part of Mahon’s inner ‘canvas’, continuing his dialogue on art and its limits. He also engages with Yeats’s idea of visual symbolism as a ‘region’ that has spatial and temporal characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Discussing Yeats’s interest in the visual arts, Elizabeth Loizeaux draws on his 1900 essay, ‘Symbolism in Painting’ to look extensively at how the Pre-Raphaelite painters

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Virago Press, 1986). p.97.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003). p.48.

impacted upon Yeats's developing poetic. Loizeaux suggests this is evident from Yeats's understanding of a region as a specific geographical region. She cites landscape in the west of Ireland, in particular the areas of Sligo and Galway, as important visual elements in Yeats's poems. They were included, not as descriptive elements of Yeats's poems, but as symbols of 'ecstatic emotion' linking physical space to abstract and intangible emotions.

The idea of 'regions' is closely connected to Yeats's interest in symbolism, both in painting and in literature. His early engagement with pre-Raphaelite art and the symbolic effect of light and colour arguably feed into his representations of Ireland as beautiful woman and old hag Cathleen ni Houlihan. This is evident from 'Symbolism in Painting', published only a year before the *Cathleen ni Houlihan* play, in which Yeats discusses traditional symbols and how they contribute to and transform the vision presented. He uses the image of a 'beautiful woman' in this same way, discussing the difference of effect depending on how the painter 'fills' in the face:

If you paint a beautiful woman and fill her face, as Rosetti filled so many faces, with an infinite love, a perfected love, "one's eyes meet no mortal thing when they meet the light of her peaceful eyes", as Michelangelo said of Vittoria Colonna; but one's thoughts stray to mortal things...If you paint the same face, and set a winged rose or a rose of gold somewhere about her, one's thoughts are of her immortal sisters, Piety and Jealousy, and of the mother, Ancestral Beauty, and of her high kinsmen, the Holy Orders, whose swords make a continual music before her face'.<sup>3</sup>

The description Yeats gives is of the female figure as a canvas, one that already contains significance for Yeats as a symbol of place. It is perhaps the most widely understood and used symbol in Irish literature and one that was reused and modified with the advent of Yeats and Lady Gregory's play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in 1901, in which the *Calleach Bherra*, or the Old Lady of Beare, becomes entwined with the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan to provide a composite image of Ireland.

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Mahon alludes to Yeats directly in several poems, taking the title and the dedication of Yeats's ekphrastic poem 'Lapis Lazuli' for his own as well as returning to Yeats in 'Harbour Lights' and 'During the War'. These allusions take on the metaphysical relation of poet to place, returning to dialogues from his past collections on how the self can mediate the past and survive in the present.

This chapter will explore Mahon's return to issues of poet and place, looking in particular at his representations of Ireland, and at the way in which allusions from Irish literary history are transformed by his contemporary vision. As already discussed, he engages with ekphrasis and visual form more broadly as an exchange of acoustic and visual qualities. In *Harbour Lights*, the full effect of this is given expression through the marriage of contemporary vision with the flux of the physical world. The return to a natural landscape inscribes the human within it as it searches for a reconciliatory frame amongst the trash, technological developments and tourism that threatens to overwhelm it. In so doing, Mahon challenges more traditional concepts of landscape and identity that have come to dominate Irish poetry.

One concept in particular he confronts throughout *Harbour Lights* is the cultural objectification of the Irish landscape. Traditional notions of the Irish idyll are replaced with a 'soul landscape' in which the ghosted remains of a literary past invoke a different order of reality. In section one, this finds expression through a mix of past, present and future as the temporal and spatial boundaries of his visions converge and the imagination of wartime writers transposes the uncertainties and anxieties of a world at war on his contemporary vision. Section two will look more closely at the co-existence of imagined and real places and of an imagination at war, both thematically and formally in the collection as historical spaces surround and encroach upon the poetic voice. It will demonstrate how a return to the physical landscape, whether real or imagined, inscribes individual consciousness within the poem. Section three will then move on to look more closely at the symbolic use of Ireland as a feminised landscape to show Mahon's movement beyond romantic, sentimental or cultural representations of Ireland through the transformation of historical forms to the patterns that remain.

#### 4.1 Changing Perspectives: Representation and the Irish Landscape

The front cover of *Harbour Lights* takes the collection back to the start of the second world war, with a 1939 painting by Paul Henry entitled 'Kinsale'. Henry, a Belfast Protestant born in 1876, was well known for his paintings of the West of Ireland, although like Mahon he spent time in Paris, Dublin and several years living on Achill Island. Ironically, Henry took on the privileged role of 'almost official artist of the Free State'.<sup>4</sup> As Tricia Cusack points out, Henry's paintings were used in both official and unofficial literature following independence to promote tourism in rural and particularly western Ireland. In this way, she suggests that a 'banal nationalism' was established, harping back to a golden-age of nationalism located in the rural west of Ireland. The term is used to denote a daily reinforcement of nationhood by means of 'an array of barely-noticed signs'.<sup>5</sup> Such examples include the use of words such as 'we' or 'us' that function to reinforce nationhood, a point already touched on in relation to Mahon's earlier ekphrastic poems.<sup>6</sup>

Henry's paintings reinforced this sense of nationhood, his work appearing regularly in tourist leaflets promoting the west of Ireland as a place of primitive natural landscape and people. Consequently his art became synonymous with a falsely constructed sense of national identity. For the most part it presented a 'pre-modern' community untouched by the technological advancements of its day that were supposedly representative of the landscape of the Catholic Free State. Yet within this, Henry's landscapes are typically void of people, suggesting a Protestant view of landscape that as Cusack suggests, is 'more typical of the Protestant urban street than the rural Catholic community'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tricia Cusack, "'A Countryside Bright with Cosy Homesteads": Irish Nationalism and the Cottage Landscape', *National Identities*, 3 (2001), 221-238. p.231.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.221

<sup>6</sup> This same reinforcement of nationhood is seen in Yeats, who uses the phrase 'we Irish' in his poem 'The Statues', 'We Irish, born into that ancient sect/But thrown upon this filthy modern tide'. See William Butler Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. by Richard J Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Cusack, p.228

Thematically then, Henry's painting on the front of *Harbour Lights* signals the return to representations of home, as well as continuing Mahon's interest in the visual arts more generally. The painting also suggests a sensibility about place that extends back to Mahon's poems of place such as 'Achill', and 'Kinsale'. Both are about particular geographical areas, yet they contain little of the places in question. 'Achill' first imagines the 'gleam in the bay' before setting off on a journey involving his children and in 'Kinsale' any sense of place is distilled to sun, sky and sea, their presence filling the void with figures of form and movement:

The kind of rain we knew is a thing of the past—  
 deep-delving, dark, deliberate you would say,  
 browsing on spire and bogland; but today  
 our sky-blue slates are steaming in the sun,  
 our yachts tinkling and dancing in the bay  
 like racehorses. We contemplate at last  
 shining windows, a future forbidden to no-one. [CP, 167]

The poem offers a shared landscape in which home, community and nationhood are expressed as elements of integration. The 'our' 'we' and 'you' in effect further surfaces that reflect something of the community, yet these surfaces are hollowed out, no longer 'deep-delving, dark, deliberate'. 'Kinsale' is founded on an 'elemental emptiness', maintained only by the inanimate and figurative objects that attempt to capture something of it. In *Harbour Lights* these spaces continue to be filled with the remains of 'real' history, whether the town of a poem's title or the people and places alluded to within it, but they also develop new perspectives on the Irish landscape through the sustained use of allusions to photography as a form of representation. Mahon includes photographs of past literary and historical figures in his poems as well as allusions to photographic sequences by an Irish artist. The effect of this is twofold. Firstly, it displaces romantic notions of place and self with real images of historical, cultural or personal significance. Secondly, it develops a blend of spaces, urban and natural, past and present, through patterns of repetition and return that connect historical and real time to generate a liminal space in which these co-exist.

This is apparent from the opening poem 'Resistance Days' in which the poet chooses the urban terrain of Paris to engage with the reality of war, death and

the 'generative darkness' of 'world domination', providing a striking contrast to the rural idyll of western Ireland. 'Resistance Days' opens with the image of the poet typing away on 'the old machine', the 'pre-*informatique*' suggesting an antiquarian distaste for the speed and technology of modern civilisations. The reader gets the sense that the poet is migrating from the modern world, as well as his geographical location. This is a sense that is fully realised as the poet's thoughts turn from the image of his 'old machine' to the places he finds himself, literally and imaginatively:

Here I sit  
 amidst the hubbub of the rue de Seine  
 while a winter fly snores at a window-pane.  
 Old existentialists, old beats, old punks  
 sat here of old; some dedicated drunks  
 still sing in the marketplace, and out the back  
 there's an old guy who knew Jack Kerouac.

[HL, 13]

The word 'old' appears six times in the first twelve lines of the poem and connects the past directly to the poet's present, linking each instance of 'old' in these lines to the poet's chosen 'method' of writing. The repetition of 'old' creates a state of reverie, transporting the poet and reader out across the streets of Paris. Rather than disappear completely however, these repetitions builds up assonantal and alliterative connections to 'old' that flow through the poem. 'Old' resonates in the predominance of words with 'l' and 'o' throughout – 'lull', 'schull' 'floodlit', 'odours', 'cold', 'boulevard', 'flow', 'Bowles', 'cloud' and it appears again in its original form in the second, third and fourth stanzas, transforming in the fifth to appear in the rhyming couplets that end on 'cold' and 'world'. The final stanza starts with the poet's proclamation that he is to look elsewhere for his inspiration, the aforementioned 'real chaos of indifferent nature'. He is adding his own preface to the poem, to let the reader know that he is returning to something he feels he has neglected. Even as he makes these claims, he does so on the back of the very 'media culture' he over-rides, the images of an 'earth strung with deterministic light' one that resonates clearly through the poem in the very click and whirr of the camera. As he returns to 'indifferent nature' the poem moves from urban to physical and then to the

metaphysical, ‘conceptual silence, the best place to live’. As he initiates a movement outside ‘real’ time, he becomes a memory within his own poem, written into the timeless landscape that remains:

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,  
when everyone is in love, our children laugh  
at the gruff bloke snuffling in the epigraph  
and in the window-frame a persistent fly  
buzzes with furious life which will never die.

[HL, 18]

The first line of the quotation from Paul Eluard that opens the poem is here translated and subsumed within Mahon’s closing lines, ‘when everyone is in love, our children laugh’. It is a quotation from ‘Notre Vie’, which translates to ‘Our Life’ uniting both poets through a shared memory of the self. The poem finds itself and the poets within it as part of a continuum that reflects moments of human endurance through a transitional place in which life and death co-exist. The ‘silent paths’, ‘secret hiding places’ and ‘locked out houses’ that are beyond the human are located in a textual universe that endures.

This universe is developed and maintained throughout by a process in which Mahon writes the poet or artist into his text as a visual artefact. Intertextuality is not only a ‘permutation of texts’ as defined by Julia Kristeva, but a permutation of a variety of texts, verbal and visual. The effect is a landscape inscribed with ‘real’ history, one that overlays the cottage landscape with human remains. The allusion to people who appear photographically upon the poem’s surface as they are recalled to mind is prefaced by Mahon’s dedication to John Minihan the Irish born portrait photographer. Minihan has published a number of collections of Irish writers and places. He is most renowned for his photographs of Samuel Beckett, although he has also photographed Mahon, his work appearing on the back covers of all Mahon’s recent collections, from his *Collected Poems* in 1999 to his most recent collection in 2010. Mahon’s friendship with Minihan is clear from the preface he wrote for the 1998 publication, “An Unweaving of Rainbows - Images of Irish Writers”, a collection of photographs taken by

Minihan.<sup>8</sup> In his preface, Mahon quotes from Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, exhibiting an interest in the medium as a form of representation. Quoting from 'On Photography',<sup>9</sup> he opens the preface with Sontag's comparison of photography and painting. His choice of Sontag's remarks are valuable for the insight they provides into his poetic:

A photograph, says Susan Sontag (*On Photography*, 1977), is 'not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation.'  
 Photography revives, she suggests, the primitive status of images: 'Our irrepensible feeling that [it] is something magical has a genuine basis. No one takes an easel painting to be in any sense co-substantial with its subject; it only represents or refers. But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of the subject.'

<sup>10</sup>

Mahon continues with an extension of Sontag's distinction, suggesting that 'one might argue, of course, that paint, like any material thing, is ultimately consubstantial with human bodies; but so too is light, as in the light of the eye.'<sup>11</sup> His inclusion of Sontag raises distinctions between photographic and painted visual form and it is this distinction that Mahon develops through his extensive use of the photograph. As one critics notes, 'in looking at a photograph one is never in dialogue with circumstance as it shifts and reformulates itself, as a memory, or a poem, might in the mind.'<sup>12</sup> The many photographs and references to photographers in *Harbour Lights* take on a static presence, one that provides a public projection of individuals and places at a specific moment in time. In Mahon's poetic, they are a 'trace' of something real but more importantly they stand like spatial-temporal markers or visual chronotopes, giving depth and

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<sup>8</sup> John Minihan, *An Unweaving of Rainbows: Images of Irish Writers* (London: Souvenir, 1988). Foreword by Derek Mahon.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> Taken from foreword to Minihan. p.5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Golding, 'Photography, Memory, Survival', *Literature and Theology*, 14 (2000), 53-68. p.58.

dimension to his work and to his sense of self. Their presence is understood as moments in time, impenetrable and inexpressible other than through the transformation of their remains into the poet's form. In effect they offer a displacement and a loss, both in time and of the self as the poem moves between historical and real time, but paradoxically they also offer a *re-placement* of the self, one that is self-consciously developed throughout *Harbour Lights*.

Discussing the significance of photography in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes notes that, 'once I feel myself observed by the lens...I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.'<sup>13</sup> The poems in the collection exhibit and parody the protective 'consciousness' of the image, not unlike the one that Roland Barthes identifies of himself. The image, whether real or imaginary, enables proximity to and distance from the self. It becomes, as Barthes notes of the photograph 'a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.'<sup>14</sup> Yet it is also a dissociation that finds in this loss fragments of similitude, in photography and the visual arts more broadly, that connect the poet to a shared consciousness of it. In Mahon's poetry, this is realised through the photographic qualities of light and shadow set against the poet's return to patterns of sound and silence developing a 'soul-scape' through a repetition of forms that metrically and figuratively establish a poetry that is 'consubstantial' with the 'trace' that remains.

This is evident in 'Shorelines', a poem based on a series of photographs by the Cork artist Vivienne Roche. Roche is a local artist living near the Old Head in Kinsale. Much of her work uses the natural world, particularly coastal features, to create sculptures that mimic the flow of time, change, life and communication.<sup>15</sup> 'Shorelines' continues the latent dialogue in *Harbour Lights* between light and shade, sound and silence and the way these patterns 'create' the

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993). p.10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.12

<sup>15</sup> 'Presentation of "Flow" Sculpture in Council Chamber', Fingal County Council, 2002 [http://www.fingalcoco.ie/minutes/meeting\\_doc.aspx?id=21817](http://www.fingalcoco.ie/minutes/meeting_doc.aspx?id=21817), [accessed 27 October 2011]. Vivienne Roche's speech gives further insight into her chosen medium and the way that the changing patterns of light on an image can 'absorb and reflect change with meaning'.

poetic imagination as it moves effortlessly between the two. The continually shifting and vanishing images of Roche's art are here used by Mahon to represent acoustically what is occurring visually and thematically throughout the collection. As he gazes on the photographs of 'sand studies' that remain he is aware that their moment is already past, their natural form continually changing with the incoming tide in a way that contrasts starkly with the static photograph, but his poem brings these to life, momentarily, through the movement within the poem that fluctuates around an ababcc rhyme scheme, transforming the physical landscape that remains into a feminised form using another of the barely perceptible signs of a shared inheritance, the pronoun 'she':

Wrack whips whistle and snore,  
then near-silence once more  
as the tide reconsiders;  
rough face of the waters.  
But flick of a wren-wing  
and she sits on a rock to sing.

[HL,50]

The wash of the natural world drives the poem to an intensity of sound sense that returns a 'spirit breathing music' from the natural world, but this is a world that is personified giving shape to 'cold eyes', 'bare features' a 'soul breeze' and finally a 'rough face' from the water that inscribes the human within it. The self, like Roche's 'Shorelines' is always in transition. This quality of movement, light and sound offers a nostalgic vision of a human landscape that is always in transition.

The photographs of people that appear throughout *Resistance Days* also return to Mahon's historical dialogue on ekphrasis, generating a comparison between modern forms of representation in relation to its historical genesis as a 'verbal representation of a visual representation'. The photograph moves beyond this being a factual image, a direct correspondence between the image in the mind and that in the world. This distinction echoes throughout the rest of *Harbour Lights*, connecting to physical and emotional spaces simultaneously. References to photography are maintained throughout the collection, frequently combined with natural spaces, such as is seen in the 'principal photography', 'tide-click' and 'sandy-prints' of 'New Wave', the 'heat lightening photography' of 'Lapis Lazuli' and the spiteful 'filmic' rain of 'During the War'. The effect is the

‘trace...stenciled off the real’ that serves Mahon’s development of emotive landscapes.

#### 4.2 ‘My soul silence too is architecture’: Poems out of place

Resistance echoes thematically and textually throughout *Harbour Lights*, in the many and varied allusions Mahon makes to poets, writers, places and artists. It incorporates not only, a ‘resistance to the medium’ as his quote from Raymond Chandler suggests but also an artistic tension that plays with the very sense of the word, taking in the historical sense of ‘resistance’ that links many of the poems in the collection to warfare.<sup>16</sup> The ‘resistance’ writing of Part I become resistant landscapes in Part II through which the past is imposed upon the present, offering complex visions that move between past, present and future perspectives. As with his earlier poems these often sit side by side with the original text, or even overwrite it, without offering an integrated vision or perspective.

In *Harbour Lights* this is overwhelmingly connected to Mahon’s play with survival and questions of what remains of the self, particularly in wartime when any sense of ‘home’ is met with uncertainty. Many of the allusions presented are overtly referenced in the text and placed in quotation marks to denote a direct reference, as can be seen for example in the first line of “During the War” where Mahon states that ‘There are those of us who say ‘during the war’’. The poem alludes primarily to Bowen, but it also echoes with splinters of Yeats and Heaney. These allusions establish dialogues of the self that move throughout the poem to incorporate temporal shifts of time and place. Starting with the ‘insane scramble for global power’ in a ‘thundering London’ Mahon moves to the ghostly desolation of Bowen’s wartime story, ‘Mysterious Kor’, set amidst a black out in Regent’s Park before returning to the present to watch the ‘dawn of a new age’. His description of ‘Mysterious Kor’ is a transcendent vision that moves the poet beyond ‘real’ time to develop a view of London that spirals away in time and space to a ‘bright smudge, from outer space’. This extra terrestrial vision of Kor is one that develops an infinity of possibilities situated between the inescapable realities of Mahon’s vision of contemporary London:

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<sup>16</sup> Grennan, p.170.

I'm reading Bowen again in mysterious Kor  
 and picturing the black-out in Regent's Park,  
 fierce moonlight blazing down on rail and door,  
 lost lovers, changing lights, fugitive smiles,  
 one car, silence, ponds white in the dark,  
 the whole place clearly visible for miles—  
 now visible, a bright smudge, from outer space  
 No serious myth since the first days of 'peace'

... 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 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.

[HL, 31]

Mahon's inclusion of Bowen's fictional place is significant not only for the dual sense of perspective it establishes, but for the response of the artist in wartime. Her novels and short stories written during the war are frequently set against the backdrop of personified and emotive landscapes in which arrivals and departures are placed out of context and imbued with a magical and indefinable essence. In *The House in Paris*, for example, the novel opens with 'a taxi skidding away from the Gare du Nord' and in the final pages a departure from the Gare du Lyon. These moments amplify the emotional pain and isolation of the characters, situating them within transitional places that, like Mahon's version of 'Mysterious Kor', spiral out beyond the limits of the self to uncertain destinations.<sup>17</sup> The description of the train station acts mimetically for the book as a whole, peopled as it is by uncertain circumstances and fluid, transitional spaces:

The station is sounding, resounding, full of steam caught on light and arches of dark air: a temple to the intention to go somewhere. Sustained sound in the shell of stone and steel, racket and running, impatience and purpose, make the soul stand still like a refugee, clutching all it has got,

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris* (London: Vintage, 1998).

asking: 'I am where'...let trains keep on crashing out to Spain, Switzerland, Italy, let Paris wash like the sea at the foot of the ramp.<sup>18</sup>

Mahon's poetic forms are mindful of Bowen's architectural structures in the same way, developing an emotional intensity in his work through a return to real and imagined landscapes. Like Bowen his cityscapes frequent transitional and uncertain spaces, they are continually moving throughout and between poems. This sense of movement is intensified by a return to the natural world and a heightened visual diction that reflects the poet's hopes and anxieties. Language again becomes a transitional agent, generating movement between the visual and verbal realms to capture the numina of the self as it finds expression through the external world of things. His use of 'Mysterious Kor' sees a return to the post-existence landscapes of his earlier works, but it also connects more broadly to the use of photography, developing 'death masks' in which people and places emanate with a perpetual absence. Like Bowen, Mahon fills this absence with qualities of light and dark much like a photograph. His allusion to 'Mysterious Kor' and Bowen simultaneously brings these two aspects together, connecting the mind of the writer to the landscapes they create. Discussing the use of figures set against landscapes in the writing of Elizabeth Bowen, Joanna Tapp Pierce comments on the blending of a character with their environment. Characters are 'remembered places superimposed upon remembered faces. The one blends with the other to complete the picture'.<sup>19</sup> In Mahon, this sense of fragments coming together, of place and person is integral to the collection, connecting with literary and cultural dialogues that reposition the past in relation to the present. Picturing 'mysterious Kor' he connects Bowen to the emotional centre of her writing, drawing on her literary and personal life simultaneously.

From her literary works, he develops Bowen's celluloid landscapes of wartime London into his own through patterns of light. 'Mysterious Kor' opens

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.237.

<sup>19</sup> Joanne Tapp Pierce, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Figures in Landscape', in *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*, ed. by Christine Cusick (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), pp. 55-65. p.54.

with two main characters who are looking futilely for a place to be alone. The stillness and silence of the London streets as they make their way towards the apartment of a friend, recalls a poem that evokes the desolate night that surrounds them, 'Mysterious Kor thy walls forsaken stand/thy lonely towers beneath a lonely moon'. It is 'a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones, with no history'.<sup>20</sup> Standing outside time, Kor is an imaginary and illusory safe haven, a sanctuary from the reality of war torn London. The landscape and the people within it are given a ghostly, supernatural glow by the light of the moon as darkness and light play off one another. The landscape and the people within it 'blaze', they are 'shining', 'glassy-silent', 'white', 'streaked', 'dazzled', 'glowing', 'glittered'. Similarly, Mahon uses a large number of adjectives of texture to develop the supernatural 'glow' in his poems. As in past collections, there is a considerable number of references to light, dark and shadow throughout *Harbour Lights*. A cursory count of some of the most frequent words show that Mahon uses variants of 'light', whether this be 'lit', lightning-struck, 'light-grain', 'light-source', forty-two times throughout the collection. The frequency of these words, as of other words of texture and atmosphere, contribute to the numinous effect of his verse, creating a 'déjà vu' effect that plays on the ghostly regenerative effects of rhyme and repetition. Variants of 'dark' and 'darkness' and of 'shadow' similarly appear with considerable frequency, as do the colours white and blue, as if imbuing them with a symbolic presence that recalls Yeats's colour symbolism.<sup>21</sup> The effect in Mahon is not symbolic however, it is metaphysical. His poetry has been described by Hugh Haughton as one of a 'metaphysical ecology'<sup>22</sup> and within *Harbour Lights* the play of light, shadow and the 'glassy-silence' they give rise to function as an element of consciousness,

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Mysterious Kor', in *Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 728-740. p. 729.

<sup>21</sup> This appears in Yeats's definition of symbolism in William Butler Yeats, 'Symbolism in Painting', in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961). p.148 It is also discussed by Bergmann Loizeaux, p.64-65. This was a device used by Yeats to move away from real spaces and from an art that was mimetic to one in which the real was replaced by the symbolic.

<sup>22</sup> Haughton. p.6.

attaching themselves to the forming, or unformed elements they come into contact with.

Mahon also uses the photograph in the way Barthes describes as the transformation of the self into another, bringing Bowen into the poem as an artefact. In this way "During the War" also maintains connections with aspects of Bowen's personal life, providing Mahon with the opportunity to develop a consciousness that is working on two levels simultaneously, the cultural and the personal. Like Mahon, Bowen was from a Protestant background. She also had strong connections with County Cork and the West of Ireland where her ancestral home, Bowen's Court was situated. Her autobiographical writings demonstrate a tension from a young age that was strongly connected to the very different experiences of home life, moving as she did between Dublin and County Cork. The idea of two selves becomes more apparent throughout her writings in the war years, when Ireland remained neutral. Bowen had reservations about Ireland's lack of engagement. This tested her allegiance, particularly given that she was a night warden in London throughout this time whilst also being a reporter in Ireland for the British Ministry of Information, a position that carried with it connotations of spying.<sup>23</sup> The uncertain allegiance shown by Bowen is one that Mahon has shared with respect to his own stance on the troubles. Discussing his reticence in 2006, Mahon commented that 'I never put a name to my position and I still can't'. He goes on to state 'there was a time when people...would ask 'Why don't these Ulster poets come out more explicitly and say what they are for? But there is all this ambiguity. That is poetry. It is the other thing that is the other thing'.<sup>24</sup> His poetic does not preclude the cultural self, nor does it sustain it, rather it 'is the other thing that is the other thing', demonstrating not only the metaphysical force of his poetic, but the reliance on an interconnected, expansive and associative framework that repeats and returns cultural conflict as a by-product of the creative conflict of the 'Irish' poet. Mahon's perspective on his position is one that exists as part of a formal 'trace', through the very language he

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<sup>23</sup> Heather Bryant-Jordan, *How Will The Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Wroe. 'A sense of place'.

uses and in this respect he also shares Bowen's assimilation of the self to the sensibilities of the text.

Within Bowen's work such sensibilities become integral aspects of a character's environment. The physical landscape is often developed as personifications of the Protestant Ascendancy in which they suffer or signal the fate of the characters within it. She describes the burning of the houses in her novel about the last days of the Irish Ascendancy in the Irish War of Independence, *The Last September* as an 'execution' of three houses in Cork and elsewhere in her writing landscapes reflect the anxieties of the present, the skyline and silence in *The Last September* harbingers of a precarious and uncertain future from early on:<sup>25</sup>

The screen of trees that reached like an arm from behind the house - embracing the lawns, banks and terraces in mild ascent - had darkened, deepening into a forest. Like splintered darkness, branches pierced the faltering dusk of leaves. Evening drenched the trees; the beeches were soundless cataracts. Behind the trees, pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion, the orange bright sky crept and smouldered. [22]

The result is a landscape of war that appears as 'the agent of resistance and salvation'.<sup>26</sup> This is true whether looking at her literary or personal writing, demonstrating an inevitable connection between the two and part of her appeal for Mahon. Her comments on 'resistance' writing, which is a term used by her in the preface to *Ivy Gripp'd by the Steps*, published in October 1945, is such that 'to survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential'. Bowen goes on to describe how people who had lost their homes to the bombings would go 'to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves—broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room—from the wreckage'.<sup>27</sup> This

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<sup>25</sup> See Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.206.

<sup>26</sup> Bryant-Jordon, p.2

<sup>27</sup> Bowen, 'Prefaces', *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*.p. 97. This is taken from the preface to 'The Demon Lover'.

connection between the ‘torn scraps’ of a life and the spiritual preservation of the self goes to the heart of Mahon’s poetry. His visions of the contemporary world articulate the threat of ‘global domination’ and the war on terror through the contrast between what is lost and what remains. In order to do this, Mahon relies on the past, through allusion, translation and self-allusion to develop a physical and metaphysical landscape that resonates with the universal fears and hopes of the individual as they confront and respond to their present moment. The effect is similar to Bowen’s own understanding of the self as it returns through the work of the other:

The past...discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetised and bewildered present. It is the ‘I’ that is sought – and retrieved at the cost of no little pain. And the ghosts...they are the certainties... hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain.<sup>28</sup>

War and the poetic response of others to the reality of war act as a pliable surface for Mahon’s own thoughts on what it means to be a poet in a contemporary world at war and how to respond to these pressures.<sup>29</sup> They revive figures from Mahon’s past that bear personal as well as historical significance, being intricately connected to his ‘intellectual’ sense of self. This is evident in the final stanza of ‘During the War’ as Mahon returns the self literally and figuratively through the progenitors who permeate the poem:

Time now to watch for the dawn of a new age  
Down there, gleaming amid the porn and veg.,  
its rippling skin mutating by the minute,  
a shivering dump with one faint star in it. [HL,32]

These lines contain echoes of Yeats’s ‘new age’, the ‘rippling skin mutating by the minute’ recalling the image of Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’ in which the living stream ‘changed minute by minute. It also contains fragments of Yeats’s

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<sup>28</sup> Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. ‘Prefaces’, p.98.

<sup>29</sup> Eluard was involved in the surrealist movement, which was acknowledged to be a reaction to the reality of the First World War and the values of a society that he wanted to escape from.

ascendency vision as Mahon offers a self-mocking portrait, 'I bounce on sneakers up a winding stair/even at sixty I can still walk on air' recalling Yeats's 'winding stair' an image present in several of his poems that fall under the category of 'wartime' poetry.<sup>30</sup> It also establishes a parallel vision as Mahon uses a phrase that occurred in Seamus Heaney's 1995 Nobel Prize lecture, 'Crediting Poetry' in which he says that 'for once in my life I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air'.<sup>31</sup>

In his acceptance speech, Heaney was talking about his childhood in County Derry and the impact that the sights and sounds of his formative years had on his later development and his poetry. He equates the developing consciousness to an 'ahistorical' and 'pre-sexual' state suspended between the old and new in which he was 'as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically and in utter silence'.<sup>32</sup> Heaney goes on to say that he credits poetry 'ultimately because poetry can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago'.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, Mahon won't allow the sense of connectedness in the word 'ripple', 'rippling skin' is not 'rippling water'. Taking Heaney's image of the 'rippling' effect to represent present time, rather than past memories, the closing lines of 'During the War', offers a stark contrast to that of Heaney's childhood or the mythic vision of Yeats. These final lines in fact again bring back Bowen in the form of a direct allusion to an earlier Mahon poem written about her, 'At the Shelbourne':

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<sup>30</sup> As well as the collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, the phrase appears in a further two of Yeats's poems from different collections. In the 1919 collection, *The Wild Swans at Coole*,<sup>10</sup> it appears in the poem 'In memory of Major Robert Gregory' and the 1928 collection *The Tower*, in 'My house'.

<sup>31</sup> See Heaney's Nobel Prize Lecture, Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', 1995 [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html) [accessed 25 October 2011].

<sup>32</sup> Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*.

<sup>33</sup> Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*.

Sunrise in the Irish Sea, dawn over Dublin Bay  
 After a stormy night, one shivering star;  
 And I picture the harsh waking everywhere,  
 The devastations of a world at war,  
 Airfields, radio silence, a darkened convoy  
 Strung out in moonlight on a glittering sea. [CP, 228]

The silent devastation of war is offered as a succession of images presented with the stillness and beauty of a photograph. Mahon imagines Bowen sat at her 'empire' desk in the neutral space of The Shelbourne Hotel as war rages in England. Her retreat provides a physical and mental space between the competing parts of her identity. Like the hyphen that separates Anglo-Irish, she connects with both, whilst the two parts remain disconnected from each other. For Mahon, this image acts as in the same way as the photographic landscape of 'Resistance Days' and illustrates the paradox of art already discussed in 'Northwind: Portrush' or 'Courtyards', that of a topographical mapping of consciousness that returns the self to the 'lost' and liminal spaces of the natural world, linking human and natural history in a continuing struggle for an expression that is 'true' to the individual's experience.

These final lines return the beauty and vulnerability of Mahon's vision through the images that remain. They are not 'true to the impact of external reality' as Heaney suggests poetry should be, nor do they sentimentalise the image as Yeats's vision of the self is so inclined. Mahon's vision of the self is in fact in direct contrast to both Heaney and Yeats. Although his works demonstrate the influence and presence of both, his poetry offers a landscape that more closely resembles the Beckettian realisation of 'inexpressibility' combined with Bowen's 'anaesthetised and bewildered present'. In *Harbour Lights* he illustrates this through a return to a landscape of Irish writers past and present, using figures such as Yeats as points of resistance through which the poetic self is able to be experienced. Yeats is invoked in 'During the War' and appears elsewhere, 'The Cloud Ceiling' recalling Yeats's 'A Prayer for my Daughter' for example, but he asserts his presence most notably in Mahon's version of 'Lapis Lazuli'. This poem takes its title and dedication from Yeats and features prominently in the

collection appearing here but also again as fragments of Yeats's original vision in the title poem to the collection 'Harbour Lights'.

Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli' was dedicated to Harry (Henry Talbot De Vere) Clifton, who sent him a Chinese carving made out of this rock in 1934. Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux notes that the carving became 'an object of meditation and source of inspiration'.<sup>34</sup> His poem begins with thoughts of the war, the reference to King Billy and the battle of the Boyne in the first stanza building the sense of a historical past, of suffering and of civilisations that rise and fall only to be built again, as the third stanza makes clear, 'all things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay'. Yeats moves from this statement to the image of the carved figure:

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
Are carved in Lapis Lazuli,  
Over them flies a long-legged bird  
A symbol of longevity;  
The third, doubtless a serving-man,  
Carries a musical instrument.

Every discolouration of the stone,  
Every accidental crack or dent  
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
Or lofty slope where it still snows  
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch  
Sweetens the little half-way house  
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare;  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play;  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.<sup>35</sup>

The poem travels through upheavals across the world before the poet returns to reflect on the carving in front of him, a carving that Foster claims Yeats saw as

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<sup>34</sup> Loizeaux, p.151.

<sup>35</sup> W.B.Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran, Second Edition (New York: Scribner, 1997).p.300.

epitomizing the ‘philosophic gaiety’ that united artists across civilisations offering consolation in the midst of chaos.’<sup>36</sup> ‘Lapis Lazuli’ is an expression of the idea of art as a monument, outlasting the artist and the rise and fall of civilisations.<sup>37</sup> The art object then attains for the artist a kind of immortality. Yeats’s use of the lapis lazuli is set in both the public and the private domain, his poem allowing the voices of women to decry the function or use of art before turning inwards to contemplate the solitudes and consolations it provides.<sup>38</sup> This movement, from world to object and hence to self is reversed in Mahon’s version as he opens his poem with a description of the lapis lazuli paperweight on his desk:

A whole night-sky that serves as a paperweight,  
 this azure block blown in from the universe  
 sits on my desk here, a still shimmering piece  
 of planet rock speckled gold and white,  
 coarse-grained and knobbly as a meteorite  
 though recognized as a ‘gem’ in its own right.  
 The willow-pattern wisdom is still unknown,  
 the twinkling sages and the branchy house;  
 for this is the real thing in its natural state,  
 the raw material from which art is born.

[HL, 24]

In contrast with Yeats’s poem, Mahon’s lapis lazuli is unformed, an image of potential. The pre-formed presence of the natural world is more powerful than the artist’s impression, because it is more ‘real’, but it is also ‘the raw material from which art is born’. It suggests a poetic in which Mahon acknowledges the limitations of art, yet whilst so doing also sees the transformational potential that it brings, both in Yeats’s poem and his own. This comes from the act of re-making and returning to past forms as points of transformation. Mahon rests copy upon copy to demonstrate the fallibility of an individual afterlife but also to highlight the artist whose remains give rise to an intensity of feeling that is

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<sup>36</sup> Foster, p.552.

<sup>37</sup> Discussing the importance of the visual arts in Yeats’s poetry, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux points out that in his later career, Yeats became increasingly interested in how works of art as well as being a physical object might also take on the symbolic status of monuments. p.148.

<sup>38</sup> Noted by Bergmann-Loizeaux, p.148

transformed to connect with their present circumstance. It is this that Mahon suggests is revived by poets and writers within and across generations.

His return to Yeats here and elsewhere develops an integrated and associated pattern of revival that is evident throughout the collection, but one that adds layer upon layer to his poems to demonstrate the effect of time and consciousness through a sheer volume of surface allusions to people and places. Some are playful, such as his rhyming of 'Juliet Binoche' with 'Brioche', whilst others act as choral odes uniting the fragments in a swell of acoustic sympathy that overwrites time, space and substance through a distillation of the art and the individual to the intensity of feeling these evoke. It is for this reason that Mahon includes the dedication to contemporary writer Harry Clifton and his reference to 'Berkeley's telephone' in stanza two, which is an allusion to Clifton's selected prose *Berkeley's Telephone and Other Fictions*.<sup>39</sup> Clifton is a contemporary and a friend of Mahon. In recent months Mahon has introduced him at the Kinsale art festival and in past years has praised his works.<sup>40</sup> Clifton's prose and his poetry in voice and effect contain characters not unlike Mahon's 'Tithonus'. A Dublin born writer, living between Ireland and France he writes about arrivals, departures, exile, history and family. His prose style is fluid and changeable, one point in time merging imperceptibly with another. The similarities between the two men are such that, as one critic notes, 'it is impossible to read him without thinking of Derek Mahon'.<sup>41</sup> Mahon's reference to him is more than a joke to play against Yeats's original, it develops associations that connect to Mahon's personal, cultural and intellectual sense of self, all of which blend into a contemporary vision of a 'sympathetic imagination' that serves to unite life with the afterlife.<sup>42</sup> This is evident at the close of 'Birds of Passage' the final story in *Berkeley's Telephone* in which 'time is suspended' and the main character enters an abstract state in which 'events conflate themselves and intensity is all that

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<sup>39</sup> Harry Clifton, *Berkeley's Telephone and Other Fictions*, ed. by Lilliput Press (Dublin, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> For further details of the Kinsale arts festival see 'Harry Clifton Introduced by Derek Mahon', 2011, <http://www.culturefox.ie/event/harry-clifton-introduced-by-derek-mahon/1216.aspx> [accessed 25 October 2011].

<sup>41</sup> Alissa Valles, 'Before History', *Boston Review*, 35 (2010), 43-44.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst. p226. This is discussed in Chapter 2.

matters'. The story is about an Irish exile, who questions where home is, asking, 'Home? For once I came back to Ireland, instead of cooling out in Hamburg as I normally would between voyages'.<sup>43</sup> The time shifts to early June and he finds himself in Dublin, noting the 'homelessness the soul avoids all its life, but sooner or later must come back to'. As the story draws to its conclusion he enters 'the realm where events conflate themselves and intensity is all that matters'. Life and death momentarily fuse until the main character is not able to tell between them. The narrative becomes nothing more than a wash of sight and sound, any sense of place or time vanishing beyond the horizon:

'Snatches of spontaneity and laughter, a breathing-space of souls, a beat that goes on and on. Outside, the flash of harbour lights, the blaze of phenomena in a world closed in by the steady drip of monsoon rain, with the horizon somewhere beyond, and the prospect of a death no more terrible there than here or anywhere else'<sup>44</sup>

Clifton's use of diction: 'flash', 'blaze', 'souls' and 'harbour lights' immediately brings Mahon's collection to mind. The sense of being alone, exiled from the world, in life and in death is the predominant theme in Clifton's final story. His prose celebrates the individual voice, thoughts and experiences that exist in and across transitional spaces. Like Mahon's block of lapis lazuli, this is always preformed, always on its way to something else, searching for an intensity that is equal to the moment. Yeats looks to a carved statue to unite artists across civilisations, Mahon to the regenerative forms of nature. He ends 'Lapis Lazuli' with an image that resists Yeats's certainty, that of the woman as a symbol of hope, one that 'reads alone on a lighted train', by nature of her positioning which is always mythical and like Clifton's 'souls' always in transition:

While planes that consume deserts of gasoline  
Darken the sun in another rapacious war  
A young woman reads alone in a lighted train,

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<sup>43</sup> Clifton, p. 230.

<sup>44</sup> Clifton, p. 239.

Scratches her scalp and shoves specs in her hair,  
 Skipping the obvious for the rich and rare.  
 Hope lies with her as it always does really  
 And the twinkling sages in the Deux Magots  
 First glimpsed by a student forty years ago  
 On a continent like a plain of lapis lazuli;  
 And the Eurostar glides into the Gare du Nord.

[HL, 25]

Hugh Haughton claims that the close of 'Lapis Lazuli' suggests that Mahon 'refuses to give up on the 'discredited ghost' of Yeats, who permeates the landscape and the collection.<sup>45</sup> Yet viewing the poem as one instance in a collection where the female form appears frequently, the 'young woman' is moving spatially towards France and the French literary environment of the 'Deux Magots' that appealed to so many writers and that recalls Mahon's time in Paris as well as the landscape of Bowen's *The House in Paris*.<sup>46</sup> The image also suggests one of 'remapping' hence the move towards 'a continent like a plain of lapis lazuli', one that covers the entire space in 'royal blue' and connects this image to the 'blue skies' and open spaces of the imagination. The regenerative function of this image is confirmed later in the collection as the 'young woman' of 'Lapis Lazuli' appears again in 'Harbour Lights' 'in track-suit and running shoes', as she 'takes shape in the heat haze'. Mahon quotes again from 'Lapis Lazuli' in 'Harbour Lights', reciting Yeats's 'fall and are built again', this time connecting the colour blue to a local geographic place, 'The Blue Haven'. The 'hope' is that the 'young woman' will be remade by future poets as she has been by those in the past, that the mapping will continue to generate new forms of survival through which the remains of past poets will reassert themselves in the present. Again as will be seen, this links thematically to what is occurring visually and acoustically in the collection through Mahon's inclusion of past literary figures. The appearance of Yeats throughout the collection connects to Mahon's continuing dialogue with historical forms. Here as elsewhere, Mahon

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<sup>45</sup> Haughton, p. 346.

<sup>46</sup> In the final pages of *The House in Paris*, Ray buys Henrietta a bronze paperweight of the Eiffel Tower.

revises his predecessor's use of symbolic forms, but he also realises the ironic and dislocating force of Yeats's vision as is evident in his final poem, 'Politics':

How can I, that girl standing there,  
 My attention fix  
 On Roman or on Russian  
 Or on Spanish politics?  
 Yet here's a travelled man that knows  
 What he talks about,  
 And there's a politician  
 That has read and thought,  
 Any maybe what they say is true  
 Of war and war's alarms.  
 But O that I were young again  
 And held her in my arms!

[348]

Yeats's poem included an allusion to Thomas Mann, 'In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms'. Yet within the poem, Yeats shows more interest in the female form than politics. The figure offers a redemptive force for poetry, one that Mahon revises, letting them 'fall and be built again' throughout his collection to question the process and function of art and of its historical connection to place.

Hence Mahon takes the 'old', as he so painstakingly points out in 'Resistance Days' to make the new. In doing so, the 'new' is held open to the old and opposing 'meanings' are forced to exist alongside each other. This is clear in Mahon's extensive use of the female figure throughout the collection as a force of redemption and renewal. It is an image that has dominated Irish poetry as a symbol of nationhood and place. In *Harbour Lights* it is again transformed by Mahon, his use of it in a multitude of contexts making it thematically defunct and its presence finally reduced to 'the chaos of indifferent nature'. Its appearance throughout *Harbour Lights* replaces function with process, illustrating the poetic imagination as a regenerative force for what the past and the future hold.

#### 4.3 Old Object, New Image: Imploding the female form

Both *The Hunt by Night* and *Harbour Lights*, are interspersed with women, past and present. In *The Hunt*, the female forms lack any distinctive features, being

predominantly figures within a landscape. 'Courtyards' in which the girl waits, 'An Old Lady', the 'Rathlin women', 'Girls on the Bridge' even his daughter is not named in 'At the Pool', a poem which Mahon revises in his *Collected Poems* to 'Katie at the Pool'. In *Harbour Lights*, he shows a movement between historical characters and the unidentified female form. Real, historical, mythical images of women appear throughout with references to Katie Tyrell, Patti Smith, Simone de Beauvoir, Juliette Binoche, Princess Diana, 'Mary-Ann, Mirium, and Elizabeth', 'Echo, Grainne, Rosalind', Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Rachel Carson, Vivienne Roche, the girl jogging in 'Harbour Lights', the mythical 'Calypso' and Inion Dubh, or 'dark daughter' and the goddess Athene in 'The Seaside Cemetery'. These are also met with images of unidentified or unnamed women in the collection, the 'girls with parasols', the woman who 'reads alone in a lighted train', the unidentified female focus of 'Langue d'Oc', and 'A Game of Cards', 'The Widow of Kinsale' and the unidentified 'she' of 'The Enchanted Wood'.

The proliferation of women throughout the two collection continues Mahon's interest in reviving past forms, but they are also integral to Mahon's movement between conceptual, cultural and formal spaces. In *Harbour Lights* they become a refractive surface of sound and vision that move beyond meaning to transform historical representations of the female to a purity of song. As with the image of the bird in 'Shorelines', the female becomes a landscape, a monument of freedom and a release into a space beyond the assimilation of meaning. Yet paradoxically it still retains and conveys meaning through the very resistance to meaning it embodies. T.S. Eliot touches upon this aspect of language in his 1942 essay, 'The Music of Poetry' where he claims that 'if...only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'.<sup>47</sup> In *Harbour Lights*, the profusion of potential associations that the vast numbers of women conjure through their presence makes assimilation of any one overarching meaning or perspective impractical. Yet

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), pp. 26-38. p.30.

Mahon does not deny historical or cultural associations, in fact the opposite is true. He allows his poems to engage with the Hag of Beare lament and with Eliot's 'Four Quartets' as regenerative sources of the form, using these to transcend the boundaries of historical and cultural meaning through their integration into a form in which sound carries and informs the content.

Both his 1982 and his 2005 collection include poems that are a re-working of the Hag of Beare's lament, another complex figure historically in Irish literature and one that again involves two or more oppositions or viewpoints within it. She appears in 'An Old Lady' in *The Hunt* and 'The Widow of Kinsale' in *Harbour Lights*, bringing Mahon's thoughts towards home. In *The Hunt by Night*, the 'old lady' of the title becomes a tragic figure who is exiled from the life she once had, her husband 'thirty years drowned', her daughters 'so very far away':

A tentatively romantic  
Figure once, she became  
Merely an old lady like  
Many another, with  
Her favourite programme  
And her sustaining faith.

[HBN, 15]

In both, she is a navy widow, the 'memories of her naval/husband, thirty years/drowned', returned in 'The Widow of Kinsale' as a 'sea widow'. The earlier version of the poem whilst set in sestets however, does not have the intricate rhyme scheme of the latter version, which relies on its rhyme scheme to generate patterns that express movement back and forth. This movement coincides with the narrative in 'The Widow of Kinsale' as she thinks back to her earlier self:

When I was a young girl we thought  
More highly of our admirers.  
I opened my young body  
Gravely to their desires;  
Now I am an old lady,  
Unwanted and unsought.

War widow and sea widow  
Many years on the shelf,

I'm hardly even a shadow  
 Of my once sexy self,  
 My beauty and high tone  
 Nothing but skin and bone. [HL, 41]

'The Widow of Kinsale' starts out with an aabbcc pattern, echoing the predominance of rhyming couplets throughout the volume rather than following more known forms of sestet rhyming patterns, although this pattern does vary throughout the poem, transforming occasionally into the better known ababcc and abcabc rhyming patterns. The patterns mimic the flow back and forth of the widow's memories. The established aabbcc forwards flow is interrupted in stanza four, as the widow thinks back to when she was young. Here the stanza changes to a clashing abcba pattern that starts to halt any sense of a progressive momentum within the verse. The rhyme scheme shifts though variants of this pattern with each stanza throughout the remainder of the poem using half rhyme in stanza thirteen to move from the widow's description of her past and present life to a meditation on her spiritual self:

But my true guiding spirit  
 Is something I inherit  
 A thing dim and opaque,  
 A lighthouse in the fog  
 A lamp hung in a wood  
 To light my solitude

[HL, 43]

The 'guiding spirit' returns the widow to an inheritance of form, one that thwarts both the movement and sentiment of the voice as it attempts to find an expression that translates the self, 'a thing', 'a lighthouse', 'a lamp' all part of the 'old hag's' ability to possess different forms. She is claimed to have been a powerful goddess, with a foster-child named Calc, who according to one critic 'used to be bathed in the sea...each morning.'<sup>48</sup> Further water, and sea connotations have been discussed in more detail by John Carey who notes that the lament makes 'extensive use of two natural images: the sea along the rocky coast of the Beare

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<sup>48</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'Milk and the Northern Goddess', in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. by Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 91-106. p.99.

Peninsula, and the rich plain of Femen in Tipperary.’<sup>49</sup> Carey looks at the lament of the woman of Beare, returning to past associations of the form in relation to the publication of a new translation at the time of writing.<sup>50</sup> In doing so, Carey claims that the poem fuses ‘two distinct temporal oppositions: cyclical versus linear time (plain and sea versus woman), and past versus present (plain and youth versus sea and age).’<sup>51</sup> In Mahon’s poem all these are evoked at some point, raising temporal and spatial oppositions that sit alongside each other.

The ‘old’ lady in Mahon’s original poem connects not only with ‘The Widow of Kinsale’ through a return to the lament, but echoes throughout the collection in the place names that Mahon refers to, for example, ‘old Hugh’ and the ‘Old Head’, both of which affirm fragments of a past life in Kinsale. His return to the myth brings with it a return to the landscape of the West of Ireland to develop patterns of continuity and flux through his collection. This is not unique to Mahon. A recent paper on Michael Longley’s ‘eco-elegies’ discusses the evolution of a mythologised West of Ireland, stemming from the Revivalist’s search for a ‘hyper-reality’ to transform and replace the real conditions and hardships that faced the Irish nation. The article discusses Longley’s transformation of the West to a ‘real’ place under threat, both from ecological and human forces.<sup>52</sup> In Mahon’s poetry, the West becomes a home under threat from ecological change, but it also finds its own ‘hyper-reality’, as the female form transforms to a landscape that either retreats into the ‘ebb-tide’ of life or that rises above it. This movement away or towards is part of a larger concern in ‘Harbour Lights’ through which the poet turns to the dissipating force of nature, finding in the natural world qualities of sound that are temporal and timeless, formed and formless through the poetic imagination. This has already been discussed in relation to Paul Valéry, whose translated poem concludes *Harbour Lights*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> John Carey, ‘Transmutations of Immortality in ‘The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare’, *Celtica*, 23 (1999), 30-37. p.31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.31.

<sup>51</sup> Carey, p.31

<sup>52</sup> Tom Herron, ‘Mayo Litteral: Michael Longley’s Eco-elegies’, *New Hibernia Review*, 14 (2010). 74-89, p.74.

<sup>53</sup> See Chapter Three, p.88.

Discussing “Le Cimetière Marin” Valéry claimed that the poem was a ‘monologue of self’ through which his intellectual interests were ‘associated with the sea and the light of a particular spot on the Mediterranean coast’.<sup>54</sup> The internalisation of place as both a real and a mythologised form but also as a formless expanse becomes most evident towards the end of the collection in ‘Harbour Lights’ when Mahon turns to the ‘lady’ within T.S.Eliot’s ‘The Dry Salvages’<sup>55</sup>:

*Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory*  
 above the fancy golf-course, taking inventory  
 of vapour trails and nuclear submarines,  
 keep close watch on our flight paths and sea-lanes,  
 our tourist coaches and our slot machines,  
 the cash dynamic and the natural gas. [HL, 64]

Mahon’s collection is split into four sections, with the reference to Eliot appearing in the third thus echoing Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. As with the inclusion of Yeats, the allusion to ‘The Dry Salvages’ is not central to Mahon’s collection, but Mahon’s poem is ‘pulled’ into a dialogue with it through the preoccupation with recurring images and patterns. There are other similarities, ‘Harbour Lights’ ends with questions of conception and procreation – these are present in ‘The Dry Salvages’ where they undergo a conversion from a natural to a metaphysical state.<sup>56</sup> In this way, Eliot is able to move from one state to another transforming the image of the woman from the secular to the divine. These images are bound up with the flow of time through the *Four Quartets*, which in turn is bound by elemental forces, compounding the images and making them both associated with and bound by other forces. ‘The Dry Salvages’ concerns itself with water, incorporating first the image of a river and then the sea to demonstrate a movement from the comprehensible, time-bound existence of mankind to the infinite uncertainties of time past and present.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Valéry, p.148.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963). p.211.

<sup>56</sup> Anthony David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*, Second (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). p.232.

<sup>57</sup> See John Bugge, ‘Rhyme as Onomatopoeia in “The Dry Salvages”’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 10 (1974), 312-316.

Of 'The Dry Salvages', A D Moody comments that the 'proper approach to the meaning is through the form', pointing out that Eliot uses the 'same set of terminal sounds' except for in the first and last stanza, repeated in a fixed sequence.<sup>58</sup> Eliot's fixed pattern of sounds means that there is no progression, the only sense of movement comes from a change in the meaning of the word 'annunciation'. His choice of terminal rhymes are also falling cadences – 'wailing', 'trailing', 'failing' giving the sense of something falling off or dissipating.

Mahon's 'Harbour Lights' does not have the form of Eliot's poem, but it carries a pattern of sounds in the same way as Eliot's poem through both end and internal patterns of rhyme. In contrast to Eliot's however, the terminal rhymes in "Harbour Lights" are frequently monosyllabic, clipped and give the illusion of a presence, both through the chosen words and through the sounds that Mahon calls on: 'Books', 'Box', 'garages', 'hedges', 'shoes', 'shower'. Mahon's end rhymes fluctuates throughout, moving predominantly in patterns of two and three end rhymes to give a sense of expansion and contraction. When he reaches his allusion to Eliot, these patterns become dispersed throughout the stanza. The chimes are still apparent, but the change in rhyme alters the tempo and feel of the poem, pulling it back and forth through the stanza.

Of the rhyming pattern of Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages' critics Moody and John Bugge have noted that in section I the cyclical and rhythmic movement of the river is representative of the temporal, of time that is human, organised and understood, whereas the sea is external to man and beyond his understanding or control.<sup>59</sup> In Eliot's poem, the thoughts or external flux of there being no incarnation produce a monotonous flow that is re-enforced by the onomatopoeic structure of the sestina which has the effect of producing the sound of waves.<sup>60</sup> The use of other words in Eliot's poem increase the intensity of these sea sounds, 'flowers' and 'hours' which Bugge suggests simulates 'the sea pulling back', and

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<sup>58</sup> Moody, p.226

<sup>59</sup> John Bugge discusses Eliot's use of onomatopoeia and how this evokes the sounds of the sea. For a more detailed reading see Bugge and Moody, p.224.

<sup>60</sup> See Bugge, p.313.

'motionless', 'erosionless' suggests a subsidiary wave. Similar sounds appear in Mahon's stanza alluding to Eliot, 'flowers', 'shores', 'Azores'. The terminal sounds fizz and lap at the edges by a similar use of rhyme. Sound becomes the carrier of sense as modern life and the natural world collide, but as with Eliot how the patterns of sound and images interact with each other is often misleading.

Discussing Eliot's use of symbols and allusions for *Four Quartets* and how they fit into the verse patterns, Ruth Abbott<sup>61</sup> has explored Eliot's parody of biblical phraseology. She claims that the patterns he sets up imbue biblical references with a 'mistaken seriousness' in order to develop sufficient detachment from his own beliefs in order to see them more clearly.<sup>62</sup> Whilst Eliot was aware of the symbolist tradition, Abbot argues that his use of them is 'playful and flirtatious' and that ultimately the verse pattern of *Four Quartets* serves only to destabilize the symbols that appear throughout the poem. As a consequence the patterns do not come to any conclusions, but are 'shifting between and qualifying allusions, so that the reader is situated in the dark place it describes', the unusual versification making it difficult to hold on to anything.

This is also Mahon's intention as the poem moves from Eliot's modernist landscape to the 'global shit storm' and 'unsustainable levels of aviation' of the present and the future before returning 'home' to the 'harbour mouth' to reflect on the end of life and his own future, 'Will the long voyage end here among friends/and swimming with a loved one from white strands/the sea loud in our veins'. This follows a strain of thought that simmers under the surface of the collection. Time and space, returning aspects of Mahon's poetry both in his ekphrastic poems and more broadly throughout his work, allows the many forms of representations and revisions to 'resist' finality. In his work this resistance inscribes allusions with space and time but they also transgress them. In the penultimate stanza of "Harbour Lights", Mahon says,

Tick of real time, the dark realities

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<sup>61</sup> Ruth Abbott, 'T. S. Eliot's Ghostly Footfalls: The Versification of the Four Quartets', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 2005, 365-372. p.372.

<sup>62</sup> Abbott, p.372.

in the unreality of the mental gaze;  
 a watery murmur, a drip of diesel oil,  
 night silence listening to the dozy soul,  
 the waves' confusion in the void. 'No dice'  
 said Einstein; but each bit of rock might claim  
 a different origin if it took its time

[HL, 66]

The quote from Einstein is changed slightly here by Mahon. What Einstein actually said was 'God does not play dice'.<sup>63</sup> The quotation was made in relation to Quantum theory, the physics of which contains a significant degree of unpredictability. Mahon's use of it here engages with the unpredictability of science and nature as comparative analogies for the uncertain life of forms, whether human or poetic. As Stephen Hawking explains:

...quantum mechanics does not predict a single definite result or an observation. Instead it predicts a number of different possible outcomes and tells us how likely each of these is....Quantum mechanics therefore introduces an unavoidable element of unpredictability or randomness into science. <sup>64</sup>

Quantum mechanics is concerned with the fundamental basis of everything that exists at a minute level. It suggests that very small particles can exist in several places at one time. This rides against the theories of general relativity however, so the laws of one are in conflict with the laws of the other. The disparity between the two suggests that science is not yet sufficiently advanced to know how the world really works.

This same discomfort is at the heart of Mahon's poetry. The pull between disparate forces, between knowledge and innocence, place and placelessness, self and nation, time and void are at the heart of his poetic and just as one scientific theory vies with another, the many and varied allusions and illusions in Mahon's work in the final instance 'resist' interpretation. As Mahon quips, 'each bit of

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<sup>63</sup> See Stephen Hawking's discussion of this point. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London: Bantam Press, 1995). p.62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.62.

rock might claim/a different origin if it took its time'. The only 'reality' for Mahon is that of the change from one form to the next, from birth through life to death. In the end, all the philosophizing, the allusions, the 'worlds' he calls upon vie for supremacy as one is continually replaced by another. In this way, we can think again about Mahon's comment that 'there is all this ambiguity. That is poetry. It is the other thing that is the other thing'.<sup>65</sup>

'Tithonus', 'The Girls on the Bridge', 'Courtyards in Delft', 'Resistance Days', all voices from the void, all exiled from the present, all inhabit the empty silence where a myth might start. The only certainty is the voice in the present as it attempts to transcend earthly restraints to find moments of pure vision. From the first poem to the last, Mahon moves between people, places, poems, associating these with a supernatural or otherworldly force. Stars, the moon, the universe, his own unborn daughter a 'space-girl' who has the joy of inhabiting 'alternative galaxies', the 'bright smudge' of Mysterious Kor from outer space, a 'soul-breeze' and 'starry wavelengths' return again the desire to find 'the right place'. For Mahon, these are the moments that come when time and space collide and a new vision is born. As T.S. Eliot noted, 'the most individual parts' of a poet's work are those in which 'the dead poets...assert their immortality most vigorously'.<sup>66</sup> At the end of 'Harbour Lights', Mahon does precisely this, incorporating an entire short poem by Salvatore Quasimodo within the text and as with 'Bowen' in 'During the War' he includes the reference to Quasimodo within the poem.<sup>67</sup>

for everyone  
'stands at the heart of life, pierced by the sun,  
and suddenly it's evening' (Quasimodo) [HL, 67]

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<sup>65</sup> Nicolas Wroe.

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, pp. 13-22. p.18.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Dombroski, 'The Rise and Fall of Fascism (1910-1945)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 459-479. p.505. The original reads: 'Ognuno sta solo cuor della terra/Traffito da un raggio di sole:/Ed è subito sera'.

Robert Dombroski's translation of Quasimodo's poem, "Everyone stands alone in the heart of the world, transfixed by a ray of sun, and it is suddenly evening" pictures the solitary figure in the world unable to escape the 'longer shadow' of passing time, but also a minute and insignificant part of something much bigger. The brevity of the poem mimics that of life and of its hypnotic beauty.<sup>68</sup>

Quasimodo's poem appeared in his 1930 collection, but the final line reappeared again in 1942 as the title of Quasimodo's publication *Ed è subito sera* which, as Louis Rossi has noted, collected together 'all the poetry he wished to preserve from his earlier books'.<sup>69</sup> This act of self-revision connects the present mind of Mahon with that of the child looking at the 'lacquered cigarette case' or the 'white shoes' discussed in chapter three. It also asserts the individual poet as timeless and temporal, like the sea, the space in which the self is forming and reforming, 'ringing in the depths beyond the reach of art'.<sup>70</sup> Mahon's 'pre-informatique', his 'flight from the 'totality and simultaneity of data', sees him attempt to return again and again to a pre-semantic world, where he can see things again for the first time, the visual and aural elements returning him to the innocence of the object as seen through the eyes of a child.<sup>71</sup> His inclusion of Quasimodo's poem changes the perspective of the collection and suggests that his poem, indeed his entire collection, is not concerned with the allusions in themselves, but with the illusions that they leave in the mind of the reader, the 'imprints' that echo of something beyond assimilation, beyond knowledge. Memories clash and chime with one another, but they do not always make, or add sense to the poem. Their presence often exists as a 'picture' of the past, not as the past itself. This is poignantly expressed by Dombroski's summary of Quasimodo:

This poem, meant to echo the austere voice of the solitary poet amid the silence and emptiness of the world, illustrates well the paradoxical

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.505.

<sup>69</sup> Louis R. Rossi, 'Salvatore Quasimodo: A Presentation', *Chicago Review*, 14:1 (1960), pp.1-23, p.14.

<sup>70</sup> Historical objects that Mahon connects directly to his developing sense of self. This is discussed at length in Chapter 3. See opening quotation.

<sup>71</sup> This is established in the opening page of Chapter 3. See p.58.

operational principle of Quasimodo's poetry, if not that of the hermetic lyric in general: that after the destruction of all illusions the poet's music can still help us forget.<sup>72</sup>

Like Quasimodo, what Mahon gives the reader and what he returns to again and again, is what Bill Tinley has been termed the 'unrealised potential of the imagination'.<sup>73</sup> These are moments of pure vision or sound that flash upon the mind with the power of universal and involuntary memory; a 'divine essence' that attempts to access a place in which the transformational powers of the imagination are able to capture an emotional intensity that is as fragile as it is beautiful. This is nowhere better to be found than in Mahon's translation of 'Le Bateau Ivre', where a childhood moment is no sooner figured than it is transformed, both realised and lost amongst the continually shifting surface of his poetic imagination:

Europe of cloud canals, I would ask of you  
 Only the pond where, on a quiet evening  
 An only child launches a toy canoe  
 As frail and pitiful as a moth in spring.                    [A, 66]

#### 4.4 Conclusion

*Harbour Lights* sees a return to the past and to Mahon's continued use of ekphrasis and revision to extend and remodel the boundaries of the visual to the verbal realm. In choosing to develop a form of ekphrasis that offers the 'trace' of something real his collection brings a deeper understanding and awareness of what constitutes the 'self' and of how it is able to transgress time and space.

In doing so, questions of self are overwhelmingly linked to inhabited spaces. His sense of self and place arises from a mental mapping of the self into the uncertain mindscape of past and present artists and writers, locating in their work an anxiety that feeds into his contemporary visions of Ireland. This is

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<sup>72</sup> Dombroski. p.505

<sup>73</sup> Bill Tinley, 'Harmonies and Disharmonies: Derek Mahon's Francophile Poetics', *Irish University Review*, 24 (1994), 80-95. p.84.

realised through the movement of the voice set against the immovable constraints of people or places from history, establishing a tension between the poet's animated visions and the stasis of historical form. His collection continues to build these spaces through returning allusions, to geographical, fictional, historical and literary representations of places linking these to his inner consciousness. These are integral to his sense of self and they are frequently linked to one or more of these spaces simultaneously, suggesting a shift or co-existence of several dimensions of consciousness simultaneously.

This sense of movement and plurality is combined with the forming, unformed or transforming of real and imagined landscapes that permeate his collection. Whether the mirror image of Portrush set against Keats's urn or the statue of lapis lazuli that offers a direct contrast to Yeats's own, Mahon uses historicised spaces to transform the present into a supernatural landscape that reflects the inner emotions and frustrations of the contemporary poet. At times his poetry reaches moments of insight and vision that return a universal consciousness in which the self finds solace and hope as it connects to something much larger and beyond its own reach. As the shards of cultural consciousness and of private memory are presented and re-presented, they converge and multiply, their place uncertain as the eviscerated forms of a historical past, whether painting, urn, symbol or photograph transform within his poetic imagination. In this way, form acts architecturally as a 'place' for the mind, a virtual home that is truer to the poet's sense of self than anything external to him.

Yet equally as moving, Mahon develops a poetic that at times reaches 'the condition of music', a term used by the poet to describe his formative influence, Samuel Beckett. His title poem 'Harbour Lights' more than any other in the collection demonstrates a contemporary consciousness composed of waves of sound that move back and forth in time. These fill the present with the shattered remains of a song that bears the full force of history and the individual's voice within it. Yet whilst the remains reflect 'snapshots' of his present, they do not translate into a coherent 'picture' or landscape that can be understood semantically. Instead, they fill the poem with the past to develop a sense of historical continuity that sits alongside, or on top of, the poet's voice, blending past vision with present experience. In so doing, they provide the necessary

escape from the reality of the historical moment, from the 'Bush gang...doing it to Iraq' and the confines of a politically driven art that looks for verification of its significance in purely social and cultural terms.

## 5. Between Self and Citizenship: Forming Potential in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon

With all its eyes, Creation looks on the Open.  
Only ours seems to have been turned backwards  
and they appear to lay traps all round it  
as if to prevent its going free.  
What *is* really out there we only know  
by looking at the countenance of creatures.  
For we take a young child and force it  
to turn around, to see shapes and forms,  
and not the Open that is so deep in the face  
of an animal. Free from death.  
Alone, *we* see it. The freed creatures's doom  
stands behind it and ahead lies God  
and when it begins to move, its movement  
is through an eternity like a well-spring.<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1 Parables of Self and Nation in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon

In the closing remarks of his 1998 Bateson lecture, 'Getting Round: Notes towards an Ars Poetica',<sup>2</sup> Paul Muldoon acknowledges the poet to be 'a product of his or her time, through whom the time may best be told', whilst also insisting on the poet's 'freedom not to espouse, directly any political position'.<sup>3</sup> His comment appears as part of a concluding statement to a lecture that concerns itself with the poetic process and in particular how the creative act has to take account, or be 'aware' of, the cultural, literary and political community in which the poet is writing. It is revealing for the singular use of the term 'directly', which sits between the poet and his position, suggesting that any political commentary is subsumed within the many and varied forms of indirection advanced within the lecture. Whilst he readily claims to 'address' the 'strategies' a poet might use to

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Martyn Crucefix (London: Enitharmon Press, 2006). p.63.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Muldoon, 'Getting Round: Notes Towards an Ars Poetica', *Essays in Criticism*, XLVIII (1998), 107-128. p108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.108

‘negotiate, perhaps even surmount, some of the apparently insurmountable difficulties facing him or her’<sup>4</sup> throughout Muldoon’s ‘Ars Poetica’, such ‘strategies’ remain elusive. They are hinted at rather than addressed, presented as part of an elaborate play between the ‘five unrelated images’ opening the lecture and the competing narratives he establishes to circumnavigate issues of ‘poetic influence’, ‘technique’ and ‘utility’.<sup>5</sup>

Muldoon’s evasive techniques are an established facet of his work. His prose and his poetry frequently play with issues of meaning through the development of competing narratives. It is an aspect of his work that continues to elicit new responses and approaches that question his sincerity and his motivation. This is understandable given the poet’s own comments on his evasive tendencies, yet he is equally quick to assert a ‘hope’ that his ‘mischief is of a rewarding kind...and will outline the complexities of being here’.<sup>6</sup> These issues are raised implicitly through *To Ireland, I*, *The End of the Poem* and his ‘Ars Poetica’, all of which advance ideas about how the Irish writer engages with their present through the extensive use of indirection and intertextuality. His ‘Ars Poetica’ in particular claims to explore the boundaries of the poet to issues of self and nation and the ‘strategies’ the poet adopts to explore and connect to both self and community.

This chapter will discuss the ‘complexities of being here’ through a closer look at the formal qualities of his work and at the relation between the syntactic and the semantic components within Muldoon’s poetry and his lectures. In so doing it will consider the dynamics of form to content, drawing on his prose works to consider how these contribute to his experience of ‘being here’. It will first look at Muldoon’s use of the image as a conscious boundary between the self and the cultural and ideological dialogues that surround it, showing how these boundaries are developed through his use of form. Many of Muldoon’s poems as John Haffenden notes ‘work a single image’ but they do so using two or more components, developing a resistant form that undermines the unity of the vision

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p108.

<sup>5</sup> These are Muldoon’s terms, see Muldoon, ‘Getting Round’, p.108.

<sup>6</sup> John Haffenden, ‘Interview with Paul Muldoon’, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, ed. by John Brown (Ireland: Salmon Publishing, 2002), pp. 185-194. p.190.

presented.<sup>7</sup> These self-conscious acts of writing become problematic, embedding poems with contradictory or non-sense forms that raise questions of their appropriateness or consequence.

Section two will then look at the way in which Muldoon purposefully adopts semantically resistant forms in his poetry, in particular through the continual return to images within the animal world to play with the boundaries of sound and sense. The replication and return to these forms develops a poetry in which the form that remains offers the only possible response to the reality of historical events. Form, as Muldoon demonstrates, is both a liberating and a transitional force that resists its own meaning in order to develop it more forcefully. This section will look at how the forms that remain replicate rather than resolve the problems they contain. In so doing Muldoon's poetry, like his prose, perpetuate dialogues on 'utility' in order to understand the consequences of them more clearly.

## 5.2 Representations of Home: The Embodied Figure of Speech

Early in his career Muldoon discussed his interest in images that act as emblems for a 'whole society'.<sup>8</sup> His interest in the 'emblematic' value of an image has become increasingly pronounced as more recent collections and pamphlets, published by Enitharmon Press, have developed this dimension of his poetic. This is the case not only through their repeated inclusion in his collections but by the recent inclusion of visual images, both within and fronting Muldoon's collections.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Haffenden, pp. 185-194. p.187.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p187.

<sup>9</sup> Muldoon's 2006 publication 'Horse Latitudes' departs from the more formal block colour designs of Faber and Faber publications to introduce a dust jacket featuring a painting by George Stubbs, 'Mares and Foals without a background'. See Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitude s* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006). More recent collections, all published by Enitharmon press, also incorporate visual art on the dust jackets. This is the case for Muldoon's most recent collection *Plan B* and his shorter pamphlets, *Medley for Morin Khur* and *When the Pie was Opened*. Paul Muldoon, *Medley for Morin Khur* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005); Paul Muldoon, *When the*

The concept of a visual or 'photogenic' text has been discussed by John Kerrigan's article, 'Ulster Ovids' which explored the photogenic qualities of Northern Irish poetry, noting that it had an acutely developed visual focus that stemmed directly from an Ovidian influence.<sup>10</sup> Kerrigan argued that this manifested itself in different ways depending on the religious background of the individual poets. In addition to visual concepts of civil conflict, his findings instilled the image with a moral or spiritual influence as faith and literature combined to generate the 'numinous' and divine images evident in Catholic writers.

Muldoon draws on the photogenic qualities of Ovid's stories in which the 'power and drama are expressed in the objects themselves' resulting in a poetic that draws 'stories' out of 'objects'.<sup>11</sup> Early poems such as 'Mules', 'Hedgehog' and 'The Frog' demonstrate objects in the external world as they are internalised by the poet as part of a story. 'The Frog', for example, recalls the 1801 Act of Union, but draws on an earlier source to develop the story. The image is an allusion taken from Gerald of Wales's *History and Topography of Ireland* written around 1187, who claimed that frogs were not indigenous to Ireland and are therefore a sign of 'the coming of the English and the imminent conquest and defeat of [the Irish] people'.<sup>12</sup> Their appearance in the pond of Trinity College after the Act of Union invests them with a colonising force, one that threatens to wipe out the population of Ireland. Muldoon's conceit offers a very visual and violent end for the frog, developing questions not only of what arises out of conflict, but of the consequences of attempting to extract a moral from the story:

There is, surely, in this story  
a moral. A moral for our times.  
What if I put him to my head

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*Pie Was Opened* (Paris: Sylph Editions, 2008); Paul Muldoon, *Plan B* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Kerrigan, pp. 237-269. This is discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> Kerrigan, p.248

<sup>12</sup> Kendall. p.94. Tim Kendal quotes directly from Gerald of Wales and notes that Muldoon refers directly to him in his following collection, *Meeting the British*. Paul Muldoon, *Meeting the British* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).

and squeezed it out of him,  
 like the juice of freshly squeezed limes,  
 or a lemon sorbet? [P, 120]

'The Frog' raises questions not only about identity and citizenship, but of the part the poet plays in developing and distilling these questions into a form that strives for resolution at any price. The problem of indirection and the uneasy position in which the poet finds himself leaves the poet and the poem contemplating which course of action to take. It also raises the question of whether it is possible, or appropriate, to extract 'meaning' from a conceit that relies on an acknowledged attachment to historical suffering. The final image suggests that any attempt to do so would lead only to a further transformation in which the moral is further removed from its source. The moral then appears to be not to search for a moral but to delight in the poet's construction and deconstruction of it.

It is also a poem that in content and design contains a heightened awareness of the consequence of visual form as it consciously engages questions of meaning. 'The Frog' offers an example of the metaphysical connection between the image and the 'stories' it embodies. These replace meaning, offering instead images that raise metaphysical questions of the relationship between forms. It also demonstrates Muldoon's interest in the metaphysical poets, in particular John Donne. This is an influence that critics have picked up as an aide to interpretation but it is also one that the poet cultivates to advance an understanding of his poetry. Claiming John Donne to be his 'first major influence' Muldoon turns to him in the 'Ars Poetica' to discuss the importance of conceit. He does so through the return to a historical dialogue on the metaphysical poets, signalled by Helen Gardner's definition of 'conceit' in her 1957 publication on the metaphysical poets:

All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly

conscious of unlikeness...Here a conceit is like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones are just two stones.<sup>13</sup>

Gardner's 'insistence on the autonomous or discrete nature of the two unlike things'<sup>14</sup> calls into play a literary historical dialogue on the metaphysical poets, in particular their use of an image incongruous to the sentiment it evokes.<sup>15</sup>

Historically this has caused dissension amongst critics, with Samuel Johnson dismissing the craft of the metaphysical poets as 'heterogeneous ideas...yoked by violence together'. Johnson argued that the metaphysicals, interested only in their own wit, 'had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and pleasures of other minds'.<sup>16</sup> His comments establish a dialogue on the metaphysical poets that returns throughout history with T.S. Eliot coming to their defence in 1921 with his assertion that their motivation rather than demonstrating an interest only in wit, attempts to find the 'verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling through a sensibility born of a sudden or unexpected association'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Books, 1986). Muldoon refers to Gardner's description in 'Getting Round', p.109.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.109.

<sup>15</sup> Muldoon, 'Getting Round', p.109. According to recent studies of Donne, his poetry was significantly conditioned by the visual culture of sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Images, as Ann Holinshead Hurley notes, could 'be encoded with covert messages or be politically or culturally saturated in the interests of a dominant power group'. Of particular interest is the crisis Hurley identifies in the image as a result of the Reformation, and the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church in conflict with the Protestant practice in England. This raised tensions in the image between the iconographic beliefs of the Catholic Church and the iconophobic beliefs of the Protestants. As a result, Hurley argues that Donne's poetry carries a sense of 'crisis' within the images he presents, both in his secular and his religious poetry. For a detailed analysis of Donne's visual imagery see: Ann Holinshead-Hurley, *John Donne's Poetry and Early Modern Visual Culture*, (Susquehanna: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corporation, 2005). p.13-14.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland; and a Criticism of Their Works: Volume 1* (Dublin: J. Moore, 1795). p.11.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1951). p.289.

Muldoon's return to Donne similarly locates his interest in a verbal equivalent of 'states of mind' developed through the use of sudden and uncertain associations. He does so by continuing with his own example through a comparison between two of the images in the opening lines of his lecture:

Helen Gardner's insistence on the autonomous or discrete nature of the two unlike things brings me back to two of those images with which I began. The image of the horse standing with its back to the wind and rain. The image of the hole in the plaster wall showing the strands of horsehair. I immediately see a connection. Put more graphically, a connection sees me. The horse and the house are one. One has the other under its skin.<sup>18</sup>

'Horse' and 'house' are almost identical in form. Their visual and acoustic nearness the catalyst for their integration to a new state, as Muldoon notes, 'one has the other under its skin'. Given the analogy of 'skin' as the resolving form, the logical assumption is that the 'house' is subsumed by the 'horse', yet the similarities between the words representing each image allows the real and the figurative to become interchangeable. Muldoon states, 'the one has the other under its skin', as opposed to saying that 'the 'horse' has the 'house' under its skin'.

The conceit offers an instance in which the transition of forms ignites a state of transcendence in the images as they move beyond their literal meanings. The point of departure from the literal constraints of their form subsequently generates the 'numinous' glow of a divine image. The imaginative power of these images when combined generates an exchange of qualities that unite the separate images in the poet's mind but in so doing they also extend and paradoxically suspend the possibility of 'meaning'. How then, can the example Muldoon provides be understood in relation to his 'Ars Poetica'? Is this another example of Muldoon's 'mischief' or does his insight into the creative process contribute to an understanding of his poetry?

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<sup>18</sup> Muldoon, 'Getting Round', p.108.

One consideration is the way in which these same images work within individual poems. Both 'horse' and 'house' are established images within Muldoon's poetic *oeuvre*, appearing in his work as fragments that connect to his real home, whether the town of the Moy in which he was born or the 'Black Horse' inn where Muldoon now lives.<sup>19</sup> They appear together four years later in his short poem 'The Loaf' and are here transformed to an uncertain dialogue on history. The presence of the horsehair in Muldoon's house again allows a fictive journey through history to begin. The image appears alongside a further image listed in the opening lines of the lecture, the Irishman, 'one of thousands who died in the early nineteenth century' digging the Delaware and Raritan canal that lies across the road from Muldoon's house:

When I put my finger to the hole they've cut for a dimmer  
switch  
in a wall of plaster stiffened with horsehair  
it seems I've scratched a two-hundred-year-old itch

*with a pink and a pink and a pinkie-pick*

When I put my ear to the hole I'm suddenly aware  
of spades and shovels turning up the gain  
all the way from Raritan to the Delaware

*with a clink and a clink and a clinky-click.*

When I put my nose to the hole I smell the flood-plain  
of the canal after a hurricane  
and the spots of green grass where thousands of Irish have  
lain

*with a stink and a stink and a stinky-stick.*

When I put my eye to the hole I see one holding horse  
dung to the rain  
in the hope, indeed, indeed,  
of washing out a few whole ears of grain

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<sup>19</sup> James Wilson points out that Muldoon's home was 'once a tavern ('The Black Horse' of the poems). See James S. F. Wilson, 'The Art of Poetry No.87', *The Paris Review*, 169 (2004), 51-91. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/30/the-art-of-poetry-no-87-paul-muldoon> [accessed 24 October 2011].

*with a wink and a wink and a winkie-wick.*

[MSG, 47]

In the repetition of syntactically similar words and phrases throughout 'The Loaf', Muldoon maintains subtle connections between the images of 'horsehair' and the Irishman 'holding horse dung to the rain' through the fragments of an image that, in its whole state, is not present in the poem. The play on 'whole' and 'hole' acoustically identical yet antonymous, subverts the semantic integrity of the poem, generating patterns of presence and absence that are carried through the poem visually as the images form and transform to be finally pulled in to the overarching image of the 'loaf of bread' baked from the seed of human toil and suffering.

These images are further modified by the form of the poem. The opening refrain of each stanza, 'When I put my' is followed with the dispersing action of the bathetic 'with a' that links one stanza to the next in an action that is both forward and effacing. The refrain returns the action of the poet tapping in to the past, both literally through the repetition of syntactical units and figuratively through the connections between the initial image and the echo of its presence in the lines that follow (horsehair, aware, Delaware, horse). It acts as both a reductive and a redemptive force, enforcing its own self-consciousness, 'aware' of the move back and forth through text and history. In this way images become both proleptic and analeptic, prophetic and memorial simultaneously as they are carried through and across the spatial boundaries of the poem, and of the poet's career.

In raising the relation of signifier to signified the refrain responds to questions of the poet's relation to cultural history and to the 'strategies' of the Irish poet navigating the political burden of signs. It questions the overall significance of repetition and whether this empties out or weighs down the sign, making it more or less meaningful. As John Hollander notes, the poetic refrain raises a 'central parabolic question for all textual refrain: *Does repeating*

*something at intervals make it important, or less so?*<sup>20</sup> 'The Loaf' asks this question, leaving the reader 'with a link and a link and a linky-lick'. The nonsense rhyme disrupts the emblematic images of Ireland as it allows the past to flow into the present. In this way the poem connects to a larger invisible force, that of historical memory, returning concepts of self to the intangible 'community' images of land and civilisation. The 'green grass where thousands of Irish have/lain', the 'horsehair' and 'horse dung' hinting at the violence and suffering of past generations and past collections is disrupted by the refrain, as like the hurricane, it washes the past into the unassimilable forms of the present.

It also returns the poem to a space that within both his lectures and his collections takes on the prevailing force of Yeats. This is particularly the case with his use of the refrain.<sup>21</sup> In his tour of Irish intertextuality, Muldoon's section on Yeats returns to Louis MacNeice's comments on the Yeatsian refrain as having 'either an intellectual meaning or...or a symbolist nonsense meaning that hits the reader below the belt'.<sup>22</sup> He continues by stating that Yeats's effect was to 'write as if you were shouting to a man across the street who you were afraid wouldn't hear you, and trying to make him understand'.<sup>23</sup> 'The Loaf' reaches this Yeatsian level of 'shouting' and like many of Yeats's poems in which the refrain appears it asks questions that remain unanswered, returning the poem to the equivocation of form.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly so in Yeats's later poems such as 'What then?' and 'The Curse of Cromwell', in which his questioning refrain asks directly for a comment on the form that precedes it, but offers no resolution on the question it keeps asking:

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<sup>20</sup> John Hollander, 'Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 73-89. p.75.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Rankin-Russell, 'The Yeatsian Refrain in Paul Muldoon's *Moy, Sand and Gravel*', *ANQ*, 19 (2006), 50-56. p.51. Russell notes that Muldoon admitted in a discussion of *Moy, Sand and Gravel* that he 'takes on Yeats directly, particularly through employing MacNeice's reading of Yeatsian poetic techniques such as the refrain'.

<sup>22</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, p.133

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.133. Muldoon is here quoting Frank O'Connor to make his point.

<sup>24</sup> Rankin-Russell, p.51.

I came on a great house in the middle of the night,  
 Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,  
 And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;  
 But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through;  
 And when I pay attention I must out and walk  
 Among the dogs and horses that understand my talk.

*O what of that, O what of that,  
 What is there left to say?*<sup>25</sup>

What remains in 'The Curse of Cromwell' is the ghostly meter of Yeats' haunted landscape and the post apocalyptic remains of a lost world. The poem returns to an inaccessibility between vision and understanding, between the figured past and the bewildered present, and as with 'The Loaf' it presents forms that are unable to connect to the voice in the present. The poem opens, 'You ask what I have found'. It is framed as a story to be told, but in the return to the refrain the story gives way to uncertainty, '*O what of that, O what of that/What is there left to say?*' Instead the poem returns only the impenetrability of the images, of dogs, horse and house, images not unlike those that had opened the Bateson lecture.

Reconciling the sign with meaning then is inherently problematic in Yeats's later poems. Instead Yeats uses language and rhetoric to mimic the inherent conflict and uncertainties of the poet, in effect making issues of responsibility the subject of the poem. In Muldoon's poetry instances of repetition or refrain modify the image, developing or diminishing the potential meanings that reside within them and it is this aspect of Yeats's later poems that Muldoon uses in poems such as 'The Loaf', asking how the image is able to construct and destruct imaginary worlds that maintain questions of responsibility and utility. 'The Loaf' offers a visual and acoustic scattering in which the repetition of words, images and phrases develop questions of the relation of one form to the next, of the boundaries of one form from the next.

This is further complicated in Muldoon's poem by the repetition and renewal of images across poems and collections. The 'horse' and the 'house' appear throughout Muldoon's work and any sense of meaning is again transformed as they engage with a new form. This is clearly seen with the

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reappearance of fragments of 'The Loaf' later on in *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, in 'At the sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' a poem in which the dead of 'The Loaf' expands to advance associations of personal tragedy with starvation and mass genocide. 'At the sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' also links World War II with Irish persecution. Recounting the impact of Hurricane Floyd on the United States, the Irish man of 'The Loaf' appears several times throughout the sequence and in the closing lines:

when the cry went up from a starving Irish schlemiel who  
washed an endosperm  
of wheat, deh-dah, from a pile of horse-keek  
held to the rain, one of those thousands of Irish schmucks  
who still loll, still loll and lollygag,  
between the preposterous tow-path and the preposterous  
berm. [MSG, 90]

Taken in this context, 'The Loaf' here becomes part of a larger historical 'flood' of images that see the influx and conflation of personal and historical suffering in the presence of the poet's loss of his child and in the weaving of personal loss amongst the historical deaths caused by starvation and world war. Like Yeats's poem however, it offers no resolution for these forms. Loss is represented by the fragments that remain, the 'smoke, that would 'fling and flail itself over Auschwitz' bringing the remains of 'clay, hair, shoes, spectacles' that float past. At the same time, the poem is cut through with the disruptive presence of warning signs, the debris floating on floodwaters after the impact of the hurricane. This fragmented vision, interspersed with the non-sense movement of the voice amongst the debris, breaks up the sense of the poem, offering a surface that textually floats past without assimilation. Consequently, Muldoon's closing stanza leaves the poem 'between the preposterous tow-path and the preposterous berm' placing the poem within a liminal space that is either unable or unwilling to distinguish one thing from the other, tow-path and berm both being strips of land bordering a canal.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> a 'berm' denotes a 'flat strip of land, raised bank or terrace bordering a river or canal' Oxford English Dictionary,

Muldoon offers a vision of history that raises the image and the ‘sign’ whether of the ‘Black Horse’ or the ‘horse’ standing with its back to the rain, above the semantic and ideological boundaries to access a state of mind that questions how they should be read. In so doing, he opens the poem to the possibilities of interpretation through a movement between the images that are offered and the voice that narrates. How can these two aspects connect? The poem asks this question, returning to the earlier instance from ‘The Loaf’ in which language breaks down to the consolations of sound. As in ‘The Loaf’, the end of the poem reduces the images within it to the bathos of sound, the ‘deh-dah’, the ‘loll and lollygag’ an acoustic dismemberment that mirrors the suffering and unspeakable atrocities of history that float past. The movement from image to sound both transfers and suspends the final act of sense. As Angela Leighton notes, ‘to learn to cross from one dimension [of form] to the other is part of the dynamics of form’.<sup>27</sup> Leighton argues that this is particularly the case in literature, where the word ‘might involve a choice of at least three things: the shape of the text on the page, the shape of its sounds in the air, and the matter of which it speaks’. She concludes by noting that this might require a ‘volumetric reading’ one which explores all these dimensions simultaneously. ‘Form, Leighton notes, ‘is not a fixed shape to be seen, but the shape of a choice to be made’.<sup>28</sup> The choice Muldoon makes here is to withhold the ‘matter of which it speaks’ through a movement that breaks down meaning to the sound sense that closes the poem.

Whilst withholding the semantic integrity of the poems, both ‘The Loaf’ and ‘The Black Horse’ maintain Muldoon’s association of the horse with historical violence and with his personal memories of home both past and present. In this way Muldoon is able to develop associations of historical violence without engaging them directly, but as he does so he frequently places them amidst a narrative in which the gradual interrelation of parts connects and combines the historical with real, mythical and cultural dialogues simultaneously.

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<sup>27</sup> Leighton. p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p.16.

This is evident in one of Muldoon's earliest poems, 'Dancers at the Moy' which connects his home town of the Moy with a community built on suffering. 'Dancers at the Moy' progresses from a description of the town square, 'Black once with mare and their stallions', to a description of the 'flat Blackwater', the 'black rain' a town 'blacker than ever', back to the 'flat Blackwater' and again to the 'black and gold river'. In this way, the poem builds associations between past and present, the present time of the 'dancers' built on past suffering. As with Muldoon's connection between 'horse' and 'house', the metaphorical connection between place and the image of the horse becomes the starting point for a series of further connections and associations that links the horse with violence, death and the real suffering of those who died in the Great Famine of the 1840's.<sup>29</sup> The image of the horse however, is carried through the poem by the associative presence of the recurrent use of the colour black and the river that runs through it. In this way, qualities of the horse and the mare in the opening lines are scattered throughout the poem. These qualities are further subject to a textual 'levelling' the repetitive use of 'flat' and its echo in 'Blackwater' simultaneously maintaining and withholding the image. In the final transformation, only the qualities remain, subsumed as part of the 'flat Blackwater', the 'wild stagger' and 'sag in its backbone' suggesting an equine form that is both mutable and enduring:

Peace having been declared  
 And a treaty signed.  
 The black and gold river  
 Ended as a trickle of brown  
 Where those horses tore  
 At briars and whins,

Ate the flesh of each other  
 Like people in famine.  
 The flat Blackwater  
 Hobbled on its stones  
 With a wild stagger  
 And sag in its backbone,

The local people gathered  
 Up the white skeletons.  
 Horses buried for years

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<sup>29</sup> Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998). p.26.

Under the foundations  
 Give their earthen floors  
 The ease of trampolines.

[NW, 11]

As a poem about place, 'Dancers at the Moy' draws historically and figuratively on the Moy, making it cultural and literal, real and mythical, in the mind of the poet. This is done by careful repetition of inter-related parts, in this particular case, by submerging the characteristics of the horse within the town square of the Moy and then further complicating the image by connecting qualities of the horse and the square with the river 'Blackwater' throughout the poem. This visual layering is re-enforced acoustically through the alliterative presence of 'flat' and recurrence of the consonant 'l', 'Italian', 'stallion', 'circling', 'plain' and the vowel 'o', 'over', 'hour', 'hooves', 'one', 'town', all of which blend and maintain the connection between the horses, the town square, the river, between image and place. The continual shift between 'worlds' in this way finally makes it difficult to distinguish between them. As a strategy for 'getting round' the difficulties of engaging with his time then, Muldoon's example of 'horse' and 'house', just like 'The Loaf' or the 'Dancers at the Moy' depends upon the transference of qualities amongst the two images provided and the resulting tension that ensues from being neither one thing or the other.

'The Loaf' and 'Dancers at the Moy' develop two main aspects of Muldoon's poetry, both of which reflect the inherent difficulties of the 'strategies' that Muldoon illustrates in his lecture. The first is the highly visual and emblematic life of the image and their transformation into the body of the text. The second is the way in which the image is encoded with 'meanings' not only through the past life of an utterance but through the formal qualities of the language that surrounds it. His poetry develops this relation using language to create dialogues between the visual and the voiced elements of his poem. It asks to be understood through the relation of form to content and through the changing dynamics of form advocated by Leighton. In so doing however, it raises questions about the relation of real and figured violence or loss in his work and how the yoking of historical violence with recurrent forms such as the horse can be reconciled or understood in the broader context of a 'strategy' for circumventing the problems of the Irish poet.

One consideration is the dialogue with Yeats and the historical forms of representation that continue to exert their presence in the work of Irish poets. In presenting disembodied forms, Muldoon is offering an instance of death that undermines the archetypal symbols of Yeats's vision. In the last few weeks of his life, Yeats wrote a letter in which he advances the idea of poetic 'truth' as an embodied form. Muldoon quotes from this in the closing lines of his lecture:

'It seems to me I have found what I wanted. When I try to put it into a phrase I say 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it... You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence'.<sup>30</sup>

Yeats is here advancing an 'instinctual' self, one that replaces philosophical argument with a symbolised truth.<sup>31</sup> Muldoon does not share Yeats's symbolist interests opting instead to advance 'truth' as an elusive component of poetic form. Yet what he does share with Yeats is a continuing interest in how poetic form can respond to the historical moment. Through a return to Yeats's last poems, he asks the unanswered question, 'how does one find an adequate reprise to the latest reprisal, a strophe equal to the latest catastrophe?' Muldoon notes of Yeats that he wrote 'The Black Tower' in the final weeks of his life at the time of an IRA bombing campaign on England. Just as with Muldoon's use of 'black' as a blending and binding agent used to fuse images of historical and mythic suffering across the body of the poem in 'Dancers at the Moy', Yeats's 'black' vision of history grows from the repetition and renewal of key words and phrases that bind and transform 'meaning' within the images presented. 'The Black Tower' and 'Cuchulain Comforted' cited by Muldoon in particular, demonstrate a similar use of repetition and refrain. In 'The Black Tower', form serves to with-hold the semantic integrity of the poem, the spent pleasures and simple faith of the soldiers, 'oath-bound', bearing 'banners' are lost to the tyranny of form as the entropy within the refrain denies resolution:

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<sup>30</sup> Muldoon, 'Getting Round', p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> As noted by Roy Foster, Yeats's comment echoes a phrase from Boehme, 'man does not perceive the truth, but God perceives the truth in man'. See Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). p.650.

Say that the men of the old black tower,  
 Though they but feed as the goatherd feeds,  
 Their money spent, their wine gone sour,  
 Lack nothing that a soldier needs,  
 That all are oath-bound men:  
 Those banners come not in.

*There in the tomb stands the dead upright,  
 But winds come up from the shore:  
 They shake when the winds roar,  
 Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

Again, Yeats creates worlds where form serves to question the interaction between history and story, to generate and battle with questions of self, responsibility and utility. In 'Cuchulain Comforted' a further example Muldoon touches upon, these questions are established through the mythical and heroic transformation of Cuchulain to the 'bird-like things' that release him from the poetic voice and enable him to take on the unassimilable forms of the shrouds that surround him. In both poems the 'embodied truth' is one in which knowledge and understanding gives way to the vision that remains.

Whilst the embodied qualities of the image are developed in Muldoon's poetic they never fix into a coherent 'whole'. Instead they are developed through the Ovidian sense of an autochthonic birth, of something that unfolds with the process of thought and that disappears just as quickly as it began. This is established by placing the image within a continuously shifting landscape in which the textual and figurative elements repeat and transform to generate a sense of a continually flowing form. In this way qualities of thought, consciousness and memory are instilled within the visual forms evoked. The result is a poetic that develops the self through recourse to the other, generating a movement between voice and vision that questions the boundaries of being and non-being, self and other through the formal qualities of language as they are played out in the poem.

For Muldoon questions of 'strategy' meet with the realization of 'utility' as they illuminate this process. The sentimental or symbolic suffering seen in Yeats's embodied 'truth' is replaced in Muldoon's poetry with the real and conceptual process involved and with the problems these pose. The frog, the horse and the house offer embodied figures that elucidate and parody the concept

of an embodied truth through the recognition of the disembodied forms that go into its creation. For Muldoon, the self is a complex dialogue of forms, influences, memories and experiences, all of which are brought together through the poem as a place of inherent contrasts and inevitable duplicities. These frequently arise out of Muldoon's use of language.

A recurring example of this is Muldoon's return to the horse as historical artifact, the parts of which attach to a vast array of historical spaces, in particular Muldoon's home town of the Moy, evoking the *dinnseanchas* tradition, his childhood, the extinction of an Indian tribe, personal and public experiences of sectarian conflict such as the Long Kesh hunger strikers, the 1919-21 Civil War, the Iraq War, World Wars I and II, the failed utopia of Coleridge and Southey.

In addition to the associations found in Muldoon's poetic, the image has amassed considerable literary, historical and mythical significance. It has associations of 'military power and prestige' as well as mythical and mysterious connotations. Speculation about the legendary horse of Troy demonstrates the uncertainty attached to it and to its function, raising questions amongst classical scholars as to whether it was a military weapon or a coded symbol used by the Greeks to identify their own men from their enemy.

Muldoon's 2006 collection, *Horse Latitudes* illustrates these uncertainties through the formal qualities of the work but also through the competing 'stories' that Muldoon attaches to it. The sonnet sequence and the collection in which it appears are littered with the abject remains of historical, mythological and imagined horses. What becomes clear in Muldoon's poetic however is that the multitude of horses and other animals that permeate them are not of themselves a central organising principle. They are one of a number of objects that the poet recycles to facilitate and maintain conflicting dialogues so as to generate several possible readings simultaneously. This works not only at the level of the image, but through Muldoon's choice to revise and edit the 'Horse Latitudes' sequence from its first appearance in 2005 to its inclusion in *Horse Latitudes* in 2006.

The earlier version of the 'Horse Latitudes' sequence appeared in Muldoon's 2005 publication, *Medley for Morin Khur (MFMK)*. This was a limited edition collection that was written by Muldoon's own admission, 'as the U.S. embarked on its foray into Iraq'. In the preface to the 2005 pamphlet,

Muldoon includes a note on the text that stresses the importance of horses and mules in the sequence that follows:

I started the sonnet sequence, 'Horse Latitudes' as the U.S. embarked on its foray into Iraq. The poems have to do with a series of battles (all beginning with the letter 'B' as if to suggest a missing Baghdad) in which horses or mules played a major role. Intercut with those battle-scenes are accounts of a 'battle' with cancer by a former lover, here named Carlotta, and a commentary on the agenda of what may only be described as the Bush 'regime'. [MFMK]

The note provides considerable detail, both on the reason for the places all beginning with 'B' and on the integration of the body-politic with the body-real in the 'battle' against the Bush regime and the cancer of a former lover. This note is omitted from *Horse Latitudes* and replaced instead with information on the front sleeve stating that the 'horse latitudes designate an area north and south of the equator in which ships tend to be becalmed', noting also that in this area 'stasis if not stagnation is the order of the day and where sailors traditionally threw horses overboard to conserve food and water'.<sup>32</sup>

The omission of this information, available only to a 'limited' audience, has resulted in a critical response that has generated other possibilities based on the information available in *Horse Latitudes* alone. In the introductory note to *Medley for Morin Khur* the horse is assigned a 'major role' whereas in *Horse Latitudes* they are depicted as excess baggage that are disregarded in order to preserve human life.

The resulting contrast between the two versions has resulted in a mixed response on the sequence. Reviewing *Horse Latitudes* in 2006, for example, Helen Vendler asks, 'why must all the title battles be B-battles? And what relation do the battles bear on the sonnets couched under them?' Without knowledge of the author's note in *MFMK*, Vendler's questions remain unanswered. The absence of any prefacing note leads her to speculate that as Bermuda falls within the horse latitudes 'perhaps Bermuda is the cause of all the battles beginning with B?'. The effect of including and then omitting information that is presented as relevant allows contrasting perspectives to 'battle it out', not unlike the competing narratives within the sequence.

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<sup>32</sup> Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*. See front sleeve of publication.

In addition to the omission of the prefacing note, the original pamphlet had only thirteen sonnets, as opposed to the nineteen that appear in *Horse Latitudes*. The later additions were to include the sonnets 'Baginbun', 'Berwick upon Tweed', 'Boyne', 'Bunker Hill', 'Basra' and 'Beersheba'. The inclusion of these sonnets in the later version have been carefully balanced. On either side of the nineteen sonnets, the newly inserted sonnets have been added at equidistant points from the middle sonnet, so that the revised poem maintains the same central point in each version, 'Bleinheim'. The precise addition of the new sonnets is also mirrored, so that where a new sonnet appears in the first half of the sequence, it is met with a new sonnet in the second half that in content returns something of its opposite. 'Baginbun' and 'Beersheba' return the image of a 'pile of toot', a slang term for cocaine, but are also mimetic of the braying sound of the mules silenced at the end of the sequence. 'Berwick upon Tweed' and 'Basra' return the image of Carlotta's *'nonno'* (Italian for grandfather), whose mythic past driving mules feeds into the silent assault on Carlotta's diseased body. 'Boyne' and 'Bunker Hill' return to the image of Carlotta in sonnets that conflate her illness with political disease and the corrective image of the grandfather, whose sense of duty and citizenship returns throughout the sequence as an oppressive regulating force. In this way a mirrored effect is returned, shaping the structure of the sequence in a way that cannot be grasped from a linear reading of the poem. This is further reinforced by the mirroring within the first and final sonnets, in which the grandfather appears.

This mirroring effect was more apparent in the 2005 version due to the placement of the short poem, 'Medley for Morin Khur' (hereafter 'Medley') that prefaced the edition. This is moved in the 2006 collection appearing twenty-four poems after the 'Horse Latitudes' sequence and disconnecting any prior association between this short poem and its function as a preface to the original sequence.

'Medley', is yet another brief poem that sees the return to the horse as an invisible component, or shape, that collects historical suffering around it. It opens up a dialogue on the unassailable forms that are called upon as a means of connecting to and expressing the elusive and expansive presence that is absent in the poem. As in 'The Loaf' and 'Dancers at the Moy', the original form is again transformed, from horse to musical instrument, from text to sound, its

transformation sounding remains in which the 'body-strewn central square' places the emptied out remains of the dead into a familiarly shaped space of past cultural and mythological suffering. This 'square', whether 'central' or 'Italian', sees a return to the 'horsehair' of 'The Loaf' and the 'hammocks of skin' in 'Dancers at the Moy' in which the dead horses are transformed and become inseparable from the form they take:

The sound box is made of a horse's head  
The resonator is horse skin.  
The strings and bow are of horsehair.

The morin khur is the thoroughbred  
of Mongolian violins.  
Its call is the call of the stallion to the mare.

A call which may no more be gainsaid  
than that of jinn to jinn  
through jasmine-weighter air.

A call that may no more be gainsaid  
than that of blood kin to kin  
through a body-strewn central square.

A square in which they'll heap the horses' heads  
by the heaps of horse skin  
and the heaps of horsehair.

[HL, 89]

The closing image of 'Medley' recalls both the mythical dead of the 'square' in his home town of the Moy, the political dead and the dead closer to home in his own family. The disembodied horse also brings to mind the hallucinogenic 'head of a horse' that gives voice to the republican hunger-strikers in 'Gathering Mushrooms', the 'wooden horse head' and the 'pair of rain bleached horses standing head to tail/Standing head to tail like some old married couple' in 'The Biddy Boys' and again of 'With that the horse head folds his horse hide parachute' in *New Selected Poems*.<sup>33</sup> In all these poems, the horse exists in close proximity to political and religious 'matter', yet the movement between visible and invisible forms, between vision and voice, suspends and conflates the boundaries of 'meaning'. The perpetual move back and forth and

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<sup>33</sup> Muldoon, *Quoof*, p.7, *Horse Latitudes*, p.25, *New Selected Poems*, p.150 respectively.

the densely repetitive rhetoric forces the poem in to a perpetual refrain in which semantic sense is always at the mercy of a visual and a sonic return.

Each tercet of 'Medley' follows an abc rhyming scheme, that results in a mirroring effect, the first and last stanza's both ending on the same words, 'skin' and 'horsehair' with only a minor change in the final rhyme in these tercets from 'horse's head' to 'horses' heads'. The change denotes the transformation of the singular horse head violin to the multiple 'heaps' of horse's heads'. The poem is unable to move, its form holding and withholding any semantic possibilities within an extreme instance of repetition.

In her review of *Horse Latitudes*, Fran Brearton noted that the title sequence, 'cannot move forward', that it is 'always returning to the default 'B' setting'.<sup>34</sup> As well as the 'stasis and stagnation' of being in the doldrums the effect of returning to the same words generates a visual and a thematic return, dissolving the boundaries between them and finding a poetic technique that is able to balance the irreconcilable demands of responsibility and utility in an equally irreconcilable form. This, Muldoon hints, is the only responsible way to balance 'strophe' and 'catastrophe', not to remain silent, but to show what lies unsaid.

This is clearly seen in his own understanding of the 'instinctual' life of the self, which finds its voice in the form the poem takes. These always involve the process of two or more components, as Muldoon notes, 'to try to bring things together is one of our greatest impulses. To make anything one must have a couple of components.'<sup>35</sup> The examples Muldoon relies on in his lecture and in his poetry return to instances in which several discursive strands are relayed simultaneously. This is also the case with his use of allusions to other poets, writers and philosophers, all of which develop tensions between two or more components. As the following section will show, these contribute to the difficulties of interpretation as they expose the process of it.

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<sup>34</sup> Fran Brearton, 'Horse Latitudes by Paul Muldoon', *Tower Poetry*, 2007

<http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/reviews/reviews-archive/189-fran-brearton-reviews-horse-latitudes-by-paul-muldoon> [accessed 27 October 2011].

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, 51-91.

### 5.3 The 'instinctual' life of form

One of the recurring images of the resistance of language in Muldoon's poetic is from the animal world. In their symbolic function animals contain ideas that are not stated directly. As seen in 'Cuchulain Comforted' they transform history to the bird-like tunes of the dead, the 'murmurs of the 'bird-like things' replacing language with the sonorous remains of the poem. Muldoon's poetic similarly finds an innate resistance towards interpretation in the animal world, one that he connects directly to concepts of self. Editing the *Faber Book of Beasts* Muldoon's states in his preface that 'in poetry, as in life, animals bring out the best in us'.<sup>36</sup> He continues by pointing out the connection between animal poems and 'hunting charms or spell's' with 'magical' qualities that forge a link between animal poetry and a poets' sense of self:

This ongoing question of 'What am I?' is, indeed, central not only to animal poetry but to all forms of poetry. For if, as Wallace Stevens argues in his essay 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', the function of the poet 'is to help people to live their lives', it might also be argued that nowhere is that responsibility thrown into sharper relief than in our accounts of the parallel lives of 'our little kinsmen'. For there, almost uniquely, do we see ourselves not only for who and what we are, but glimpse the possibility of what we might become'. [FBB, XVII]

For a poet whose collections depict animals as victims of violent and inhumane acts, there is a certain amount of irony in this claim. From Muldoon's first collection animals have been starved to death, squeezed to death, beheaded, had their throats cut, skinned, died in battle and are frequently evoked as harbingers of disease and pestilence. Muldoon's claim that animals 'bring out the best in us', by default can be understood to refer to the 'best' creatively rather than morally. With the *Faber Book of Beasts* animals are given the power of thought; they are engendered and idealised, they are a means of entry and exit to another world, space or time. The volume is filled with poems that explore the scope and limitations of the self and the impact of external forces on it. Many poems in the volume demonstrate Muldoon's fascination with 'special worlds' and the

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<sup>36</sup> *The Faber Book of Beasts*, ed. by Paul Muldoon (London: Faber & Faber, 1997).

importance that animals play in accessing them, some of which appear as allusive fragments in Muldoon's poems, developing his preoccupation with recurring patterns and past forms attached to a pastoral mode. Of the poets that appear in the collection, Muldoon returns in both his own poetry and his prose works to the figures of Robert Frost and Edward Thomas.

Whilst much has already been written on the influence of Frost on Muldoon, the figure of Edward Thomas has not been extensively explored in relation to Muldoon, although similarities between the men have been touched upon.<sup>37</sup> Discussing the use of parable in the poetry of Muldoon, Edna Longley has linked him to Thomas, claiming that 'in the matter of knowing, seeing and saying, Muldoon's quietest understatement (pre-statement) is sometimes closer in spirit to Edward Thomas.'<sup>38</sup> What Muldoon finds in many of Thomas's poems are the allegorical landscapes through which the poet engages with questions of self and the realities of conflict. 'As the Team's Head Brass', written during World War I is one such poem. It explores the possible worlds, of what might or could have been if the war had not happened and death had not inflicted its mark on the community. This is established through a pastoral poem in which Thomas offers a dialogue on the war in the form of a conversation between a ploughman and the poet. Thomas constructs his dialogue against the motion of a team of horses ploughing. This scene is bracketed at both ends of the poem with a 'flash' from the team's headbrass as lovers disappear into and subsequently reappear from a wood that borders the field. Set in the first person the farmer tells the poet of the impact of the war on rural life and of his friend killed in France after only two days service, the same night a blizzard felled the tree the stranger sits to rest on:

...Now if  
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'  
'And I should not have sat here. Everything  
Would have been different. For it would have been  
Another world'.

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<sup>37</sup> For an account of the influence of Frost on Muldoon see Buxton, pp. 26-44..

<sup>38</sup> Longley. p. 224.

As the lovers reappear, the poem ends with the image of the horses:

The horses started and for the last time  
I watched the clods crumble and topple over  
After the ploughshare and stumbling team.<sup>39</sup>

Thomas creates contiguous worlds in the parallel activities of the team of horses and the lovers, the servitude of one contrasted with the freedom of the other. Their prospective narratives are reminiscent of the 'yoking' of disparate forms as the team of horses turn and the lovers disappear into the woods. The loss and potential gain for the community is mirrored by the two narratives, the connection between the death of the friend and potential for life mirrored in the pastoral form, so much so that when the stranger asks 'Many lost?' the reply from the farmer is not in terms of men, but of the number of 'teams' available to work the farm. Edna Longley notes that '...Thomas's imaginative archaeology into the English countryside is... a metaphor and a myth for processes by which, in understanding our origins and dark avenues, we might discover ourselves'.<sup>40</sup> Her comment, not unlike Muldoon's own, suggests that the self is mirrored in the natural and unstated realms of a contiguous world, one in which the imagination looks through external forms to 'see' the invisible and inscribed forms of a historical and cultural landscape.

This same approach is evident when looking at Muldoon's allusion to 'As the Team's Head-brass' in his 1998 collection, *Hay*. Here Muldoon evokes his own pastoral vision that sees the return of the horse as an invisible yet pervasive force that appears in the dream vision of his father's childhood. 'Third Epistle to Timothy', ('Third Epistle') set against the aftermath of the Irish Civil war invokes a nightmare pastoral. As Muldoon returns to 1923 to imagine his father as a young servant boy working as a stable hand, the 'team's headbrass' ushers in an incremental and incantatory rhythm which builds throughout the poem, to gain a

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<sup>39</sup> Edna Longley, *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2008). p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

sense of the incremental dead. The allusion to Thomas's poem of the First World War opens the flood gates and ushers in the historical dead from a string of further historical conflicts, including the Land League disputes of the 1880's, the battle of Saintfield in 1789. The poem 'buoyed up by nothing more than the ballast/of hay' is destined to go up in flames at any minute, it's presence maintained only by the splinters of warring diction and words that recall with bomb-like aplomb the past violence of battlefields and machine-guns:

A year since they kidnapped Anketell Moutray from his  
home at Favour Royal,  
dragging him, blindfolded, the length of his own gravel  
path,  
eighty years old, the Orange county grand master. Four  
A-Specials shot on a train  
in Clones. The Clogher valley  
a blaze of flax-mills and hay-sheds. Memories of the  
Land League. Davitt and Biggar.  
Breaking the boycott at Lough Mask.  
The Land Leaguers beaten  
at the second battle of Saintfield. It shall be revealed ...  
A year since they cut out the clapper of a collabor ... a  
collabor...  
a collaborator from Maguiresbridge. [H, 97]

In the form of the lovers and the team of horses, Thomas's poem combines personal and communal loss with the possibilities of an uncertain future. Muldoon's poem expresses this loss through exposing the precarious foundations of past forms. Unlike Thomas however, his poem does not necessarily give voice to his society so much as allow it to exist as part of a continually developing process. The pastoral, the *dinnseanchas*, the *aisling*, all present in the evocation of place and in the 'half bestowed, half beseeching' arm of Hardy's servant girl, Lizzie are all subject to the instabilities of time and language. These are present amongst the continually changing states of consciousness in the poem, from the apolitical and enlightened grace of innocence in his young father to the religious and political consciousness that surrounds him in the figure of Cummins and the diseased horses. The infected horses usher in past wars, and combine this with the invisible and pervasive consequence of intolerance and genocide through the insidious forces of the natural world, the hay about to go up in flames, the biological warfare associated with glanders or 'farcy', the 'line of chafers and

cheeselips/that overthrow as they undermine'.<sup>41</sup> Like Thomas's 'As the Team's Head-brass', it builds on the invisible worlds that both promise freedom and threaten oblivion and in so doing the poem conflates and compresses literary, political and personal histories.

This movement between worlds is made possible through the subtle blending of human and animal worlds. His father's spirit is roused by the 'taper or link/in which a louse/flare up', his dreams are filled with the sights and sounds of an encroaching army of horses, chafers and cheeselips, 'that overthrow as they undermine'.<sup>42</sup> The dream vision is filled with the threat of an overgrown and overgrowing natural world, the 'bud of farcy', the repeated weight of hay, meadow cat's-tail, lucerne, white clover, all of which retain momentum and malice through the infernal 'knocking' of the absent Clydesdales and the armies of pests that invade the developing consciousness of his eleven year old father.

The 'special world' evoked by his father's dream vision in this way becomes viewed through the animal world, developing what Mark Turner describes as a 'conceptual blend'.<sup>43</sup> Advancing a theory of the human mind as fundamentally literary, Turner explores a cognitive theory of thought, mind and language based on the primacy of parable as a means of understanding and projecting stories, and as a process fundamental to human thought. Turner argues that the combination of human and animal worlds develop a 'blended space', a space built on input from two or more separate spaces. Importantly, Turner notes that blending is a 'process that can be applied repeatedly, and blends themselves can be inputs into other blends'<sup>44</sup> so that these in turn develop new structures not directly linked to the original components of the parable that went towards its making.

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<sup>41</sup> Glander is a bacterial disease occurring primarily in horses, mules and donkeys. It has also been used as a biological warfare weapon during past wars as it has a high mortality rate in humans.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998* (Faber and Faber, 2001). p.454.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). p 57.

<sup>44</sup> Turner, p.83.

Using a pastoral example in his discussion, he notes that when animals blend human and animal characteristics, they create a space that has the 'freedom to deal in all the vivid specifics - ploughing, straw, barns, planning, talking, deceiving' of the two 'input' spaces. It keeps both spaces open and contributing to the story as 'meaning' is constructed in the blended space that connects them.<sup>45</sup> 'Meaning' is therefore constructed through the mental mapping between one or more spaces.

Muldoon's use of the animal world here provides the freedom to engage with both a personal and a public past through a change of state and through the effect of blending a conscious and a sub-conscious state simultaneously. It is in this way that he is able to include political and historical matter as an uncertain and dislocated narrative that sits beyond his father's consciousness. Whilst they are both sustained along with the encroaching 'uproar' of the natural world, they are suspended through the movement between animal and human that maintains the dream vision. The symbolic life of the image as seen in Yeats's vision is here replaced with an image that like Turner's understanding of the human mind has no definite boundaries, that exists across time and space and that in so doing, is able to enter into a dialogue with real political and historical warfare without defining the relation between it and the poet. The past is therefore able to stand as a dislocated vision in the present.

'Third Epistle' also develops Muldoon's continued fascination with boundaries and the transgression of them. This includes the movement between formal boundaries as noted by Leighton, but it also incorporates a movement between philosophical and ideological boundaries. His blending of the animal and human world is one in which thought and intent is subsumed within the impenetrable world of the other. In mapping animal to human therefore, Muldoon's poetic also establishes dialogues on the boundaries between internal and external 'worlds', between conscious and sub-conscious limits and importantly, how these interact with the splinters of historical violence that appear throughout his collections.

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<sup>45</sup> Turner, p.61.

The concept of a mapping of forms that is suggested by Muldoon's use of real and conceptual limits has been discussed in relation to the uncertainties arising from the liminal borders between real acts of violence and the symbolic forms these take in the work of contemporary poets. Alex Houen's study on the representation of terrorism in literature raises key questions on the borders between real and symbolic violence and the cultural representation of terrorist attacks, such as 9/11, as figured events.<sup>46</sup> One way in which Houen claims contemporary Irish writers contend with the cultural pressures of being Irish is to develop a 'poetic mapping' through which the associative possibilities in one context are carried to another.<sup>47</sup>

Taking his lead from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Houen writes comprehensively of the 'cartographic' potential of poems produced by contemporary Irish poets. His discussion of Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson draws attention to recurring images as 'a form of exploded trope', or what he terms a 'diaphor'.<sup>48</sup> From the Greek for difference, the term 'diaphor' has several other meanings; 'to tear asunder; to carry over; to bear; to permeate both space and time'. Houen states that the diaphor as understood by Heidegger is a 'middle ground' that differentiates between 'essence' and 'existence' and that it 'is not simply a series of metaphors...it is a figure that is torn in a number of directions at once such that it is affected by the contingencies of a wider cultural topography'.<sup>49</sup> In this way it presents a 'mutable mapping of language and tropes'. Houen points out that this transference of a figure is not a metaphorical or synecdochic transference, but a 'variable in itself' that encompasses a plethora of associations, thereby transmitting multiple messages at the same time.

In Muldoon's poetry, this sense of the image as a diaphor, able to transgress boundaries, to be suspended between 'essence' and 'existence' develops and deflates the distinction between literal and non-literal, being and

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<sup>46</sup> Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). p.3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.269

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.273

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.274

non-being, so much so that the act of replication becomes both more expansive and more impenetrable. It also leaves the poem suspended amidst the possibilities it evokes, effectively neutralising the semantic in favour of an expanse of potential and unformed possibilities that exist beyond the real time of the poem.

If understood in this way, the recurrent images in Muldoon's poetry establishes a permanently mutating and expanding form, one that simultaneously sustains and suspends meaning in the act of creation. The closing lines of 'Third Epistle' evokes this sense of an expanse beyond the known world as the pastoral nightmare pans out to a vision of the 'spirit troop/of hay treaders' whose image is no sooner evoked than transformed once again with the 'taper's mild uproar' to float across 'an earth/without form and void'. Expansive and impenetrable, the 'spirit troop' generate a sense of continuity and loss simultaneously. His inclusion of the image from Thomas's 'As the Team's Head-brass' is also an instance in which the image of the horse maps to a number of spaces simultaneously to develop provisional patterns of engagement that radiate with the possibilities of personal, cultural and political life. The effect is an unspoken boundary through which the poet is able to transcend the limitations of the self.

Muldoon's use of Thomas both here and in his prose works offer an example of how his allusions connect to this much larger concern with boundaries, whether psychological, philosophical, real or natural and the way in which these are embedded within the formal characteristics of a poem. Muldoon's lectures on *The End of the Poem*, return to Thomas as part of a discussion on parallel worlds and on the importance of the formal characteristics of a poem in accessing and moving between these worlds.

*The End of the Poem* is a collection of fifteen lectures that all explore how and whether a poem can 'end'. Muldoon's return to Edward Thomas appears in his lecture on Stevie Smith, entitled 'I remember' in which he calls not only on 'As the Team's Head-brass', but also on Thomas's poem 'Adelstrop'.<sup>50</sup> His allusion to Thomas appears as part of a fractured narrative in which Muldoon

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<sup>50</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, p.144.

explores the qualities of his form and their influence on Smith, but that does so amidst philosophical theories of language. Of 'As the Team's Head-brass', he comments on Thomas's attention to the form of his poem, with particular regard to how the poem 'turns' with the motion of the plough. In this way, Muldoon links the qualities of Thomas's verse to the act of writing, claiming the poet to be focusing on the prosodic qualities of the verse as they generate the patterns of movement and speech that are at the poem's centre. Muldoon's claim suggests that the poet's intent is subsumed within the form that the poem takes and in this way s/he is able to develop several concurrent dialogues, a point that is finally made in the closing lines of the essay in which the formal and thematic components of Smith's poem 'collide' and become 'inextricably combined'.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, the lecture turns and returns to the ideas of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, but also to those of Gaston Bachelard, both of whom have written about the boundaries of inner and outer life and the implications of these concepts for an understanding of the movement between consciousness and the external world. Muldoon's comment of needing 'two or more components' is here illustrated through the use of ideas from these two philosophers to build a new analogy for an understanding of the 'end' of the poem. His example also provides insight into the way in which Muldoon transcends boundaries through the 'yoking' of heterogeneous ideas. The presence of Agamben and Bachelard contribute to his exploration of limits as they are understood through language and its transformation in the poetic imagination. In the opening pages of the essay Muldoon states, 'I'll be combining some of Agamben's ideas about limits with some of Bachelard's in an attempt to address the sense of the phrase 'the end of the poem'<sup>52</sup>. How then, do the works of Giorgio Agamben and Gaston Bachelard

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.164. This same sense of the form of Thomas's poem being integral to the possibilities it establishes is noted by Edna Longley, who claims that Thomas 'lets rural labour speak for itself', adding that it is the dialogue within the poem that 'interrupts the ploughman's circuits' and that 'establishes a template for all the poem's structures; for the collapse of cyclical paradigms; for war talk...for the imagery and back-story linked with the 'fallen elm'; for gaps, discontinuities and absences'. See Edward Thomas and Edna Longley, *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2008). p.301.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, p. 152.

contribute to an understanding of boundaries and how do they connect to the examples he provides from Thomas?

The answer to this lies in the suspension of 'states', of being and non-being, inside and outside and of the possibilities generated by this suspension. The poems to which he alludes in his lecture, all develop textual qualities of this division between inner and outer life, self and other through the relation or translation of the poet from an inner to an outer world. Muldoon quotes extensively from Agamben's ideas on 'poetic crisis' taken from his 1999 publication: also entitled *The End of the Poem*.<sup>53</sup> Within his chapter of the same title, Agamben opens with the statement that his 'plan' is to 'define a poetic institution that has until now remained unidentified: the end of the poem'.<sup>54</sup> He continues by claiming that to define the end of the poem he has to 'begin with a claim...namely, that poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere'.<sup>55</sup> Agamben then presents a view of poetics as dependent on the opposition of metrical and semantic 'segmentation', as 'tension' that exists, or that is created through the pull of oppositional states.

Muldoon discusses Agamben's idea that enjambment is the sole criteria for distinguishing poetry from prose, and that 'the poem is an organism grounded in the perception of the limits and endings that define - without ever fully coinciding with, and almost in intermittent dispute with - sonorous (or graphic) units and semantic units'.<sup>56</sup> The tension between the semantic and the syntactic components of a poetic result in what Agamben terms a 'state of emergency', that is, 'at the point in which sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense, the poem looks for shelter in suspending its own end in a declaration, so to speak, of the state of poetic emergency'.<sup>57</sup> Without further analysis or explanation, Muldoon then cuts to two further sources. The first is to be found in another of

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<sup>53</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.109.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.109

<sup>56</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, p.151

<sup>57</sup> Agamben, p.35

Agamben's chapters in *The End of the Poem*, that concerns itself with the etymology of words. Agamben notes of the term 'stanza' that it was 'coined solely for the purpose of discussing poetic technique, so that the object in which the whole art of the *canzone* was enshrined should be called a stanza, that is, a capacious storehouse or receptacle for the art in its entirety'.<sup>58</sup> Muldoon then uses this definition to fuse Agamben's 'system', the point at which the sound is to be 'ruined', with that of Gaston Bachelard's concept of 'intimate immensity'. Taken from his 1958 publication, *The Poetics of Space*,<sup>59</sup> Bachelard's concept explores how forms, such as houses, shells and nests have a shaping effect on thoughts, memories and dreams. He defines 'immensity' as 'a philosophical category of daydream' producing 'an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity'.<sup>60</sup> He goes on to refine this state of 'immensity' claiming that '... immensity becomes a primal value, a primal intimate value'.<sup>61</sup>

Muldoon's shift from one to the other, his claim to 'combine Agamben's system' with Bachelard's 'inner state', generates a perpetuating state that both receives and deflects form, suspending the 'end' indefinitely as language gives way to an unquantifiable 'primal' value. In combining the work of these two philosophers, he offers a parable of conceit in which the poet enacts the process of 'yoking' together ideas as an expression of the limitless potential of the poetic imagination. His use of Thomas as an establishing force in his essay is one that provides an example of the tension where these points meet. In 'As the Team's Head-brass' and in 'Adelstrop', the semantic is suspended within the syntactic and thematic movement of the poems through the forms that remain. Whether this is through the movement of the horses as they continue to plough their furrow or the song of the blackbirds within the short, but remarkable poem, 'Adelstrop':

Yes, I remember Adelstrop —  
The name, because one afternoon

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<sup>58</sup> Agamben, p.35

<sup>59</sup> Bachelard, p.183.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.183.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p.195.

Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adelstrop — only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>62</sup>

'Adelstrop offers both the suspension of Agamben's perspective and the 'infinite immensity' of Bachelard's'. The movement from inner contemplation to the physical world is here one that suspends the self indefinitely amidst the real and the imaginary. The claim of the poet, that he sees 'only the name' of 'Adelstrop', transforms the place into a 'special world' and an imagined space for poetic reverie. It is the transformation of a moment into a form that endures and outlives moment, poet and place, as art, offering as Longley notes a 'model' for 'art that conceals art':

Adelstrop has inspired homages, imitations and parodies. It remains a model not only for the "train-windows" poem, such as Philip Larkin's 'I remember, I remember', but also for the translation of memory into poetic epiphany - including the negative epiphany of 'I remember, I remember': 'Nothing like something, happens anywhere'. A model, too, for art that conceals art, Adelstrop knows exactly what it is doing. The remembered scene alludes to the lyric it will engender: 'Someone cleared his throat; 'And for that minute a blackbird sang'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Longley, *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poem*, p.51.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p.177.

In the case of 'Adelstrop', poetic memory takes the form of a blackbird singing, offering an image that is both expansive and untranslatable.<sup>64</sup> In the final lines of 'Adelstrop' the blackbirds close by reverberate outwards, 'mistier/Farther and farther, all the birds/Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire'. The transformation of memory to the uncontainable and unassimilable worlds of the birds that sing resolve the poem sonically whilst leaving the reader to muse on the uncertainties that rest unresolved within the poem. 'Adelstrop', Muldoon claims, is a 'brilliant presentation of active inaction, significant insignificance'.<sup>65</sup> It evokes a threshold between finite and infinite, between being and non-being, between man and animal. It is indicative of an underlying frame or process in which the 'intimate immensities' of thought, language and the potential for renewal, are realised. These processes for poets such as Thomas, as for Muldoon, are inseparable from the forms they take.

Throughout Muldoon's poetry, these processes continue to develop new examples of poems that concern themselves with form and the impossibility of separating form from content. Muldoon's contribution to a 2007 collection of pieces published to commemorate the work of Edward Thomas offered his poem 'The Killdeer' taken from his 2002 collection *Moy Sand and Gravel*. In prefacing this poem, he states that when he was writing it he was 'hoping against hope that the spirit of Edward Thomas might have been breathing down my neck'. He continues:

I'm certain that I was conscious of the amazing combination of tact and tactility of which he was capable in a short poem like 'Thaw', in which he allows for that wonderful argument from nature of the 'speculating rooks' seeing 'what we below could not see, Winter pass'. I'm certain, too, that I was thinking of the word-play on 'speculating' both in the sense of 'contemplating' and 'the action or practice of buying and selling goods, lands, stocks and shares etc in order to profit by the rise and fall in the market value'.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> This is the same image that Muldoon refers to in the Bateson lecture, when he returns Yeats's final poems to the nursery rhyme 'Sing a song of sixpence'.

<sup>65</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, p.145.

<sup>66</sup> Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn, *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007). p.180.

His response finds in Thomas's poem a place in which animal and human attributes blend and resist explanation. Thomas's poem is brief, but in the space of four lines the rooks reflect back the 'vocation' of the artist, to see beyond the limits of the known world in order to understand their relation to it:

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed  
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed  
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass,  
What we below could not see, Winter pass.<sup>67</sup>

Thomas's 'speculating rooks' admit the birds into a realm that is neither animal nor human. The rooks that 'cawed/And saw what we could not see', blend with the cognizant world of the human, but are raised, literally and metaphorically, above humanity in their vantage point. Muldoon's poem transforms this sense of 'speculation' to 'The Killdeer', in which the human and the animal world are set side by side, this time asking questions of humanity that are mirrored in the inaccessible acts of the killdeer arranging its nest. His poem questions the real 'profit' of the poet, turning to the liminal world of the killdeer to find a 'reason' in the image the poem finally rests on:

Why was he trying to clear  
a space in the forest of beech  
by turning beech posts and, by beech pegs,  
fitting each to each?

For the reason at which the killdeer  
seems to be clutching  
when she lays her four pear-shaped eggs  
with the pointed ends touching. [MSG, 54]

'The Killdeer' asks that the reader translates from human to animal space, a process that is not possible in the literal sense. In the literary world however, objects are interchangeable to the extent that both the equivocal 'he' and the unknowable 'killdeer' have some sense of kinship, both are trying to create forms

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<sup>67</sup> Longley, *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poem*, p.114.

from nature. The poem extracts the unassimilable force of nature from both, the drive for human nature to replicate his environment somehow a fitting comparison with the natural force that drives the killdeer to replicate itself. In both instances the potential within their separate worlds is ultimately impenetrable yet it is continuous, sustaining the endless process of making, whether human or natural. The result is a poem in which the replication of forms suspends the act of completion and completes the act of suspension. Posing a question at the close of the stanza, the poem opens up a space between the human and the animal world, a space, to quote the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, 'where formless life and lifeless form meet in a distinct life-form and form of living - and which life-form and form of living is rich with its own singular potentiality.'<sup>68</sup> Muldoon's poetic draws extensively on this 'potentiality' to maintain a poetic in which the potential for these readings remain open.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

The relation of form to content in Muldoon's poetry then, is one in which the poet consciously develops poems that question the relation between these parts. His poetry responds to the 'insurmountable difficulties' of the Irish poet through the development of a poetic that generates the very questions it is asked to explain. In this way, Muldoon engages indirectly with issues of poetic responsibility and utility, maintaining the poem as both instance and example of the principles he elucidates in his prose works.

In so doing, Muldoon draws on the past influences of poets such as John Donne and Edward Thomas to connect the formal qualities of their work with his own. This is evident in his return to Donne to develop patterns of engagement that stem from the use of conceit and in his repeated return to Edward Thomas to illustrate the way in which form is encoded within the images and examples the poet adopts throughout his poetry.

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<sup>68</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p.93. This space in a 'forest of beech' brings with it a historical dialogue of philosophical and literary 'speculation'.

In particular, Muldoon returns to the animal world to demonstrate the inherent resistance of form. This is evident not only in the examples of Thomas that appear in Muldoon's poetry, but in their appearance in his prose works, where they contribute to a dialogue of form and content that break down the boundaries between inner and outer life. Using examples from the work of current and recent philosophers, Muldoon presents the problems that arise as language attempts to translate the mind and to establish a frame for the self that illustrates the complexity of its condition.

## 6. Conclusion

The use of allusion, adaptation and ekphrasis in the poetry of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon offer poems that engage the reader in questions of form and of how these reflect the personal and historical circumstances of the poet. Both Mahon and Muldoon return to past forms to connect to historical and cultural dialogues on the use and consolations of art. This is evident throughout the thesis in their extensive use of intertextuality to develop parallel, liminal and uncertain 'worlds' through which the poet is able to question not only the process in which he is engaging, but the limitations or failings of it. For both poets then, the presence of intertextuality from early in their careers has established a means of questioning how art and the artist can survive the real, cultural and imagined present.

Whilst both poets use allusion, adaptation and ekphrasis to develop these ideas, the way in which they do so is notably different. Mahon establishes a dialogue with form through his continued return to the visual aspects of language. His conscious use of the ekphrastic tradition develops a poetic with depth and dimension, instilling a sense of time, space and perspective in his poetry. These are connected to the poet's inner consciousness through the narrative voice, attaching the visual to the cultural, historical and personal world of the poet. Through allusions to paintings and sculptures he develops and maintains dialogues with the personal, cultural and philosophical concerns of poetry, finding in the impenetrable silence of the visual object the resistance necessary to dramatise the voice as it flows through it. This is the case even in poems that do not allude to a visual work of art, but that are filled with a language of contrast and texture. In this way Mahon is able to blend and blur the conceptual boundaries of image and word, exposing the semantic and syntactic tensions within his poetry.

The effect is a poetic that becomes self-consciously reflective alluding to the relation between the visual and verbal components of his poetry in order to generate questions of representation. His poetry drives and questions the relation of art to the historical and to the personal, contributing to the collective sense of

the poem as a place in and through which the self is made and remade. As part of this process, his sense of identity and of place is encoded within the visual objects that surround the self, but such encoding by its very nature establishes a dislocation between thought and expression. Mahon uses this sense of dislocation to question concepts of self, place and the act of representation.

Similarly in the poetry of Muldoon, movements between the boundaries of visual and verbal form continue to raise issues of representation and interpretation. Unlike Mahon's painted text however, Muldoon turns to the 'emblematic' use of the image to generate complex and often competing dialogues between the visual and the verbal aspects of his language. His poems frequently use narrative techniques to disrupt the semantic integrity of the images presented, moving as a consequence towards the 'esoteric' and 'encrypted'.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of this is to heighten the awareness of process in his poems. Whether a short poem such as 'The Frog' or a longer sequence, the formal patterning of rhyme and repetition augments the use of language and draws attention to the syntactic structure of the poem. In so doing language suggests form.

In the work of both then, form is not just a structure it is a metaphysical space in and through which both poets construct dialogues on self and society. In Muldoon, the formal structures of the poem develop parables that can often only be realised through the questions they pose as the poem reaches its end. In Mahon, the transformation of voice into vision inscribes the self on the resistant and impenetrable landscapes, whether of Belfast or elsewhere. Common to both is a resistance to historical form.

This is evident through their allusions to Yeats. Despite the many allusions and influences throughout their poetry, the prevailing force of Yeats appears as a force to be resisted. Mahon's return to Yeats generates new possibilities from old forms, whether this be Yeats's ekphrastic vision of art as a symbol of immortality or his cultural archetypes of the female form. As a consequence, Mahon maintains a sense of continuity with his heritage, but he

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<sup>1</sup> These are Muldoon's terms, see *To Ireland, I*, p.73.

does not allow it to console or settle into a unifying vision. Instead he develops a response that maintains the fluidity and impermanence of thought as a consoling and regenerative force, linking historical images and people to natural, supernatural and imagined places. For Muldoon the legacy of Yeats is transformed through the use of language, in particular of the poetic refrain, rhyme and repetition. As elements in Yeats's poetic these were often used to suspend the questions being asked in a poem. Muldoon develops this in his own poetic to make the questioning integral to the form of the refrain as it picks up and echoes the unassimilable and unspeakable fragments of historical forms that remain. For Muldoon language deconstructs suffering, grief and loss, it does not make statements or draw conclusions from them.

A further consequence of the movement between visual, verbal and conceptual form results in a poetry that consciously engages with the polemics of presence and absence, offering a fluid exchange between these two spaces and the philosophical and textual problems that arise from it. In Mahon, the exiled voice is inscribed within the vision that remains. His poetry transforms the external world into an inner landscape on which the personal and public anxieties of the present take shape through a continued dialogue with the past. In Muldoon the flux between presence and absence is lived through the repetition and return of forms and the continual exchange between the real and the imagined worlds that these invoke. Such self-conscious acts of writing play with issues of interpretation, asking whether and how they should be read and in so doing, engage a critical awareness of the reception of their own work. Both offer a unique form of resistance to historical narratives and the pressures of an Irish inheritance.

Writing of the 'resistance' to poetry in 2004, James Longenbach, comments, 'Imagine a country in which poetry matters because by definition poems are relevant to daily life'.<sup>2</sup> This country is Ireland and just as Longenbach notes the seriousness of poetry in some cultures, in Ireland poetry and poets are a political vehicle, whether they choose to be so or not. This is acknowledged

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<sup>2</sup> James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). p. 1.

within the poetry of both Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon through their continued use of past forms to negotiate and 'surmount' the cultural pressures that surround them. Whilst neither poet ignores this sense of responsibility, they question the capacity and appropriateness of poetry to do so. Whether adaptation, allusion or ekphrasis, the existence of a second text or 'voice' to replace their own is one that has the effect of generating a physical, psychological and temporal space between the self and the world it translates in order to address these questions. In so doing, both poets develop paradigms for art that resists the closure of statement in order to advance them through the forms that remain.

Their resistance to closure comes in part through the conscious act of re-making as a thematic and formal quality in the work of both poets. Muldoon demonstrates an interest in the re-making that arises through the formal structure of the poem or the allusions within it. His prose works discuss the way in which texts are remade by future generations. In *The End of Poem*, for example, it becomes clear that to Muldoon whilst the poem may 'end' formally it continues to exert a presence in the texts and memories of subsequent generations. Again Muldoon turns to the formal qualities of the poem to show how allusions are formed and reformed across generations, but in doing so he also demonstrates his claims for two contiguous worlds, 'two texts' and the difficulties of interpretation that emerge when these both exert their presence in a poem.

Similarly, Mahon's repeated use of ekphrasis and revision continue to re-map the boundaries of self and society throughout his collections. From early on in his career, he makes and re-makes past works, both of other artists and his own. In so doing, he consciously alters the perspectives he offers, setting one possibility against another, revising poems so that they sit in contention with their earlier counterpart. As a consequence, the poetry of Muldoon and Mahon has become responsive and resistant to the act of interpretation, generating texts that resonate with possibilities that extend beyond the real time of the poem and that offer uncertainty as an inherently redeeming force of the creative imagination.

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