

Going Home

Northern Ireland and
Derek Mahon's *The Hunt by Night*

Then the time of exile began, the endless search for justification, the aimless nostalgia, the most painful, the most heart-breaking questions, those of the heart which asks itself, where can I feel at home?

—ALBERT CAMUS

I

In *The Hudson Letter*, his New York sequence of 1994, the poet Derek Mahon jokingly calls himself a “recovering Ulster Protestant from Co. Down”. He was recovering from a serious alcoholic breakdown, a recovery enacted in the sequence, but he was also suggesting that he was still recovering from the peculiar predicament of being a disenchanted Ulster Protestant. The first poem of *Collected Poems* (1999), “Spring in Belfast”, is an evocation of the “echoing back streets of this desperate city”, and ends with a reluctant acknowledgement of his identification with it: “One part of my mind must learn to know its place”. “Glengormley”, also written while he was at Trinity College Dublin, ends with a comparably barbed sense of belonging: “By necessity, if not choice, I live here too”. In fact Mahon left the “desperate city” of Belfast in 1960 for Trinity and Dublin, and has chosen to live elsewhere for most of his life. More of his mind, we infer, wanted to escape his place.

After completing his degree in Trinity and spending a couple of *Wanderjahren* in North America, he returned briefly to teach for a year in Belfast in 1967 and published a little pamphlet called *Ecclesiastes* (1970), which he said in the preface was “in some measure, the poetic record of an attempt by an uprooted Ulsterman to come to terms with his background and with something, glimpsed through that background”. The “uprooted

Ulsterman” didn’t stay long, however, moving to Dublin the following year, where in 1970 he published his buoyantly satirical verse letter “Beyond Howth Head”, a kind of “Goodbye to All That”. Later the same year he took up residence beyond Howth Head himself, moving to London where he was based for the next 15 years as free-lance writer and literary journalist. There he published *Lives* (1972), and *The Snow Party* (1975) as well as *Poems 1962-1978* (1979), his first retrospective. These were the worst years of the Troubles that erupted in the North of Ireland after 1969, but though the “burnt-out buses” of “Rage for Order” and “flash-bulb firing squad” of “A Disused Shed” indirectly bear upon the conflict that erupted in his home province, Northern Ireland hardly figures directly in these collections, leading Edna Longley in a cleriheo of 1974 published in the *Honest Ulsterman*, to pronounce that: “Derek Mahon/ Is doing all he can/ To rid his imagination/ Of the Northern Irish situation”.

In 1977, however, Mahon was appointed Poet-in-Residence at the new University of Ulster at Coleraine and this involved him for a couple of years in a return to the “Northern Irish situation” in many senses. He wrote little while there but “The Poet in Residence” (after Corbière) translates not only Corbière’s poem “Le Poète Contumace” but, “at one remove”, something of the contumacious sense of alienation he experienced during his two years at Coleraine as “An artist or philosopher, after a fashion/ Who chose to live beyond the pale”. “The Writer in Residence” is now beyond the pale of the *Collected Poems*, but his second verse letter “The Sea in Winter”, a desperately urbane Dejection Ode from the same period, survives as a bleak record of the intense personal and poetic crisis he felt there. A handful of other poems, including “Going Home”, “Autobiographies”, “The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush”, and “The Attic”, appeared at the end of *Poems 1962-78*, which was itself a product of his return home and involved an often savage return to many of his earlier poems, which resulted, notoriously, in their often drastic revision.

In “Afterlives” (from *Lives*) Mahon had reflected on what it would have been like if he had stayed in Northern Ireland and lived it “bomb by bomb” (rhyming “bomb” with “home”). In “Going Home” (dedicated to the Ulster poet John Hewitt), he contrasts the sylvan (but polluted) plenitude of the English

countryside, where he nourishes an Ovidian dream of turning into a tree, "As if I owned the place", to the starkness of the North Antrim Coast where he is heading, and where he imagines a tree "Rooted in stony ground,/ A last stubborn growth/ Battered by constant rain/. And twisted by the sea-wind". The Northern Irish tree is "Crone, crow, scarecrow", a "burnt-out angel", and merges into the "Cloud-continent of night/ As if it belonged there". John Hewitt had returned to Ireland on his retirement from the art gallery in Coventry in 1972, a move which resurrected his poetic career. In "The Bitter Gourd", the primal text of Ulster Regionalism, Hewitt had argued that the artist must be "a *rooted* man" not "an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in the stream". In a later review Mahon thought this "a bit harsh on thistledown". "Speaking as a twig in the stream", he asked "What of the free-floating imagination, Keats's 'negative capability', Yeats's 'lonely impulse of delight'?" By contrast to Hewitt, the "uprooted" Mahon found his homecoming much less productive. "Going Home" is a spikily alienated take on Hewitt's fantasy of rootedness and belonging. Initially placed and dated "Lingfield-Coleraine 1977", its essential indeterminacy is reflected in the changing titles Mahon has given it: first "A Departure", then "The Return", then "Going Home". The poem is torn between places.

Looking back soon after this return to the North, Mahon said:

Some people seem to be able to write in the middle of suffering, like Michael Longley or Paul Muldoon, but I found when I went back there recently to Coleraine that I wrote nothing at all until I was leaving. Then when I'd come away I wrote a whole batch of poems about it, some of which are in the new book... When I was actually there, all I could do was re-experience the landscape, re-experience the awfulness.

The new book he is referring to was the Gallery pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft* (1981) which postdates *Poems 1962-78* and includes "Derry Morning", "North Wind: Portrush", "Rathlin Island", poems all later included in *The Hunt by Night*. They return to the "awfulness" he "re-experienced" on his traumatic return to the North. Though they did not emerge till later, all

the poems of *The Hunt by Night* (1982) and *Antarctica* (1986) owe something of their concentrated political and aesthetic force to Mahon's sense of crisis at Coleraine, but it is the poems with specifically Northern Irish settings I want to look at here.

The poems written in and after this visit to Northern Ireland confound obvious oppositions between exile and home. "Ovid in Tomis" in *The Hunt* is Mahon's most extended study of the artist as an exile, an exile that is political but also cultural and metaphysical. To some extent we might see it as an exilic product of the home-coming of 1977. In fact the figure of Ovid presides over both books, relating the apparently distinct themes of exile and metamorphosis. Ovid, the poet of *Metamorphosis*, was also the poet of *Tristia*, the poems of exile in Tomis, and Mahon's poems make us re-imagine both projects as intimately connected. *Metamorphosis*, via art, evolution, change of heart or place, becomes the over-riding preoccupation of *The Hunt by Night*, a book of changes that also suggests a poetics and metaphysics of exile. *Antarctica*, which followed it in 1985, continues the Ovidian vein with two translations from the *Amores* entitled "Ovid in Love", while "Tithonus" is a Beckettian metamorphosis of Greek myth. With these two books, translation too begins to acquire a central metamorphic role, and "from The Drunken Barge (after Rimbaud)"—originally "from The Drunken Boat"—offers a model of Mahon's new poetic passport: "Relieved of the dull weight/ Of cautious crew and inventories cargo—/ Phlegmatic flax, quotidian grain—I let/ The current carry me where I chose to go" (that "phlegmatic flax" carrying a definite Ulster timbre). *Antarctica* offers a continuation and intensification of the vision articulated across *The Hunt by Night*, marking the end of the road of this whole phase of Mahon's creative life. It culminates in the bleak exilic territory of the "Antarctica" mapped in the title poem, and the long poem about Camus entitled "Death and the Sun", which ends with Mahon "listening in silence to his rich despair" (the original seven stanza poem survives in *Collected Poems* only as a one-stanza fragment, "Camus in Ulster", collected with the other Northern Ireland poems of 1977-9).

The Hunt by Night includes some of his most compelling poems about the North of Ireland, including "Derry Morning", "North Wind: Portrush" and "Rathlin Island", poems in which the poet's subjective autobiographical impulse—his own

despair—is most fully objectified in accounts of place. *Antarctica* includes two more, “Death and the Sun” and “Craigvara House”, a retrospective account of Mahon’s breakdown and convalescence there (“That was the year/ of the black nights and clear/ mornings”). These poems all draw on the dark autobiographical capital generated by his return to his native province during the late 1970s as writer in Residence at the new University of Ulster in Coleraine. Looking back now, this seems a watershed in his career. In the poems written in its aftermath, Northern Ireland is viewed from the distance of elsewhere. For like *The Snow Party* (1975), *The Hunt* casts its net much more widely than Northern Ireland or any of the poems he wrote there. Seamus Heaney called it “Derek Mahon’s most exuberant and authoritative volume to date”, suggesting “some creative tremor has given him deepening access to his sources of power... as if the very modernity of his intelligence has goaded a primitive stamina in his imagination”. The “modernity” of Mahon’s intelligence seems to have been goaded in part by his experience of the violent political impasse in the North of Ireland, in part by what he calls his “life crisis” there. In “North Wind: Portrush”, he says “I shall never forget the wind/ On this benighted coast./ It works itself into the mind/ Like the high keen of a lost/ Lear-spirit in agony”. Recording that “Our hearts are starved with frost/ Through countless generations”, he laments:

Elsewhere the olive grove,
 Naked lunch in the grass,
 Poppies and parasols,
 Blue skies and mythic love.
 Here only stricken souls
 No springtime can release.

Released from the “stricken” North, Mahon took full advantage of what Desmond O’Grady calls his “exit visa”. Though still shadowed by an acute historical awareness of violence born of his Irish experience—linked to a “North Wind” that has none of the renovating force of Shelley’s West Wind—Mahon revels in elsewhere, in the freedom to travel the cultural world, moving between places, judging every here against an elsewhere, as in “Death and the Sun”, where Camus and Mahon are re-defined

as a kind of compound Ulster Algerian ghost.

A glance at the title page of *The Hunt* shows the new range that enters his work at this time. In terms of geographical spread, titles name Delft, Svendborg, Brighton, Tomis, Maine, Berlin, Co. Cork and North Carolina, while *Antarctica* adds Kensington, Achill, Kinsale and Antarctica. In terms of cultural range, we hear of a pantheon of writers, "Brecht in Svendborg", "Knut Hamsun in Old Age", "Ovid in Tomis" and the Joyce of "The Joycentenary Ode", while "Tractatus" takes its title from Wittgenstein, "The Earth" is a translation from Pasternak, and "The Drunken Barge" offers a version of Rimbaud, taking us to Denmark, Norway, Dublin, Austria, Russia and France. Other poems purloin the titles of paintings: "Courtyards in Delft" from Pieter De Hooch, "The Hunt by Night" from Uccello, and "Girls on the Bridge" from Edvard Munch, taking us indirectly to Holland, Italy and Norway respectively. There are other poems about Mahon's England: "Another Sunday Morning" and "One of these Nights" being poems about London and "The Woods" about the Mahons' "green retreat" in Surrey. If the poems have a global reach, however, they are also anchored in the local and diurnal in a way the poems of *The Snow Party* rarely were. The titles name things as well as people and places: courtyards, an island, a flute, a pool, the radio, a table, a bridge, a beach, a lighthouse, a postcard, a bar, a boat, a garage, and a globe. The markedly global dimension of Mahon's poetry of this period—"the earth spins to my finger-tips", as he says in "The Globe in North Carolina"—is balanced by an acute sense of the mediating role of everyday objects, including globes, within the space of modern culture. This is a poetry which, as he says in "Courtyards in Delft", casts "oblique light on the trite".

Though regrettably the Brecht poem, "The Joycentenary Ode", "Postcard from Berlin" and "Lighthouse in Maine" don't make it into *Collected Poems*, twenty-six of the original thirty *Hunt* poems do, making it the most fully represented of the books up to *The Yellow Book* (1998). This is as it should be, since this book, with *The Snow Party*, confirmed him as a major poet, laying down the poems and terms by which his entire career will be read. Building on his interim pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft* (Gallery, 1981) *The Hunt* is Mahon's most consistent and perfectly achieved book, even as it explores, in poems like "Courtyards in Delft" and "The Hunt by Night", the flaws and

horrors which seem to be the condition of aesthetic order. The Derry of "Derry Morning" haunts Delft, as Belfast shadows the Moscow of the Rilke translation. *Antarctica* takes *The Hunt* a little further in the same direction, representing the culmination or consummation of Mahon's middle-period. It too is richly represented in the *Collected Poems*, with ten of its twelve poems included (though the Camus poem in drastically abbreviated form). If the "weird, plaintive voice" of the wind in Portrush blasts "the subtler arts", the Mahon of *The Hunt by Night* and *Antarctica* pursues them with a vengeance and with a kind of desperate elegance.

"Courtyards in Delft" speaks of the "trim composure" of Dutch painting, "the chaste/ Precision of the thing and the thing made", and the poems of this period, though as aware of "disharmonies" as they are of "harmonies", show Mahon as an immaculate precisionist playing the well-tempered clavier of traditional poetic form. "Courtyards" is written in trim rhymed eight-line pentameter stanzas, with a shifting rhyme scheme, while "Derry Morning", "Another Sunday Morning" and "The Globe in Carolina" all use an eight-line Marvellian stanza made up of four-beat rhyming couplets. "North Wind: Portrush" and "A Garage in Co. Cork" use six-line irregularly rhymed stanzas, though of different line lengths, while "Rathlin Island" and "Death and the Sun" take the form of off-rhymed, rough-edged ten-line stanzas. "Hunger" (originally "Knut Hamsun in Old Age") speaks of Yeats's aspiration towards "perfection of the work" and does so in asymmetrical fluctuational rhymed seven-line stanzas that have a Yeatsian spaciousness, though on a less regular pattern. There are a number of poems too in Mahon's characteristic three-line stanza-form, first developed in "An Image from Beckett". These include "Ovid in Tomis", and the "Joycentenary Ode", a satirical modern riff in fluent Finneganese, and the Beckettian "Tithonus" in *Antarctica*. "The Woods" develops a particularly musical variant of the three-line stanza, composed as it is in ripples of suavely expanding rhymed triplets ("A green retreat,/ secluded and sedate,/ part of a once great estate"), and Mahon uses this again in another autobiographical poem about a place of temporary residence, "Craigvara House" in *Antarctica*. Other poems show Mahon's versatility in "the subtler arts" of verse, the three villanelles ("The Andean Flute" and "The Dawn Chorus" in *Hunt*, and

the title poem in *Antarctica*) and three intricately poised poems about paintings in symmetrically rhymed concertina form (with a rhyme-scheme of ABCCBA), "The Hunt by Night" and "Girls on the Bridge" in the first book, "St Eustace" in the second. If in all this, Mahon shows himself the heir of such great modern stanzaic poets as Auden, Empson, MacNeice, Bishop and Lowell, rather than the modernists, the interest in modernism demonstrated in "The Joycentenary Ode" is developed with superb historical panache in his study of Wyndham Lewis's "Men of 1914" in London. "A Kensington Notebook" is an investigation of the aesthetics and politics of modernism by way of a consummate pastiche of Pound's own pastiche sequence about an earlier art movement, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. What is impressive about Mahon's formal invention at this time is that it is inseparable from historical investigation. The speaker in "The Last of the Fire Kings" notoriously declares "I am through with history", but in the art of this time, the poet is uniquely pre-occupied by the relation between history, autobiography and the aesthetic impulse.

In the rest of this essay, I want to look at the poems specifically about the North of Ireland, poems that are a product of his return there in the late 1970s, but which also project the terms of his particular exit visa and begin to establish his view of art as a haunted "hunt by night" involving crossing a "dark channel". These poems include "Courtyards in Delft", the best of the powerful ekphrastic poems he wrote at this time after returning to London from Belfast, and "Derry Morning", "North Wind: Portrush", "Rathlin" and "Craigvara House", some of his most evocative poems about his native province. I do not have space here to deal with "Courtyards in Delft" and its oblique treatment of the theme of Northern Ireland, but through readings of the other poems I want to suggest that these war-scarred studies of the dubious "peace" of Northern Ireland lie behind Mahon's exilic preoccupation with cultural metamorphosis in many other times and places in *The Hunt by Night* and *Antarctica*.

II

A number of the most arresting poems at the beginning of *The Hunt* return to the North, and one of these, "Derry Morning" returns us to where the contemporary troubles were ignited. "Here it began", says the poem, confirming Eamonn O'Malley's observation that "Most accounts of the current troubles in Northern Ireland begin at 5 October 1968, which is as good a date to start from as any other. It was the date of the first civil rights march in Derry". The Civil Rights March was barred by the RUC, but the brutal police attempts to suppress it were captured by Radio Telefis Éireann, so that "images of unrestrained police batoning unarmed demonstrators, including MP's... flashed across the world", as Jonathan Bradon reports: "At a stroke the television coverage of the events of 5 October 1968 destabilised Northern Ireland, and as the sectarian dragon was fully reawakened, the region was plunged into a near-revolutionary crisis, characterised by bitter intercommunal conflict and protracted violence and destruction." Though Mahon's poem, dated January 1979 in *Courtyards*, catches the city during a moment of respite ("its desolation almost peace"), the poem reflects on the way recent events caused "a measurable/ Tremor on the Richter Scale/ Of world events, each vibrant scene/ Translated to the drizzling screen". His poem is about translating them back to the place itself, the elusiveness of the place where "history" happens.

This is the political background to Mahon's serene morning scene. Mahon's poem is in the eight-line stanza perfected by Marvell, an English Protestant poet who wrote "An Horatian Ode" on Cromwell, but it refers to and draws on the *aisling*, a Gaelic genre associated with the political poetry of the eighteenth century and with roots in much earlier literature (the tenth-century *Aislinge Oenguso*, for example):

An early crone,
 Muse of a fitful revolution
 Wasted by the fray, she sees
 Her *aisling* falter in the breeze,
 Her oak-grove vision hesitate
 By empty wharf and city gate.

The *aisling* typically recounts a poet's vision of a female persona

of Ireland, a political Muse such as Cathleen Ní Houlihan, abandoned by her legitimate spouse, and it was used by numerous eighteenth-century poets such as Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin to articulate Irish grievances against the post-Williamite Protestant regime, and look forward to the eventual triumph of the Catholic Jacobite cause. In Mahon's poem, the "rubbled city" of Derry, with its "broken mouth", is described as "an early crone", something like the *cailleach* or "old hag" of early Irish literature, and it is she, not the poet, who sees "Her *aisling* falter in the breeze/ Her oak-grove vision hesitate" by the empty wharf. She is the "Muse of a fitful revolution", clearly a Nationalist one, but less an inspirational young *spéirbhean* ("sky-woman") than an exhausted crone. "Derry", the Irish and nationalist name for the city Unionists and BBC called "Londonderry", means an "oak-grove", of course, and Mahon's poem tactfully recreates the Nationalist vision among the "cavities" of the disfigured city in a form associated with a very different political and poetic tradition.

The poem itself catches the helicopters' "clattering shadows" that "whop/ Mechanically over pub and shop", "The shining roofs and murmuring schools" of the divided city, and "Smoke from a thousand chimneys" blowing "One way beneath the returning rains" (ironically belying the way most things in this most sectarian city go different ways according to religious affiliation). The helicopter apart, the poet is struck by the "strangely pastoral silence" there. If it seems as if violence is over, this is only a mirage (at a reading at the Poetry Society, Earl's Court, 18 November 1982, Mahon said that the poem had been misconstrued to suggest the Troubles were at an end, adding "I do not believe they will ever be at an end"). Though the "mist clears", the cavities are still "black"; rains may "shroud the bomb-sites" but they are still there. The vision of a desolation that is "almost peace" reminds us that it isn't. It's somewhat like the "Square of the Carrousel" visited by Wordsworth, as he "questions the mute leaves with pain/ And half upbraids their silence", thinking of the September Massacres. History itself is invisible. Mahon's morning view of Derry is enigmatic and inconclusive, a view of what cannot be seen. There's a faltering vision, a drizzling screen, and at the close, "the returning rains/ That shroud the bomb-sites, while the fog/ Of time receives the ideology". In the final fog, Mahon

observes a mournful foreign-ness, an ominous, accidental connection to elsewhere and another revolution, "A Russian freighter bound for home" that "Mourns to the city in its gloom". "Home" is somewhere else and "it is not clear what this inconclusive close might imply about the fate of the ironically named "boom-town" of Derry or its "fitful revolution". The final note, though elegiac, is a far cry from the "all clear to the empty holes of spring" envisaged in "In Carrowdore Churchyard". Neither "the ideologue" nor the "early crone" see anything to reassure them in the apparently peaceful cityscape of Derry, a "strangely pastoral" site of political violence that betrays nothing. "What of the change envisioned here?" the poem asks, but it certainly doesn't offer any answer.

"Rathlin", a poem about a trip to a remote and beautiful island off the North Antrim Coast, also reflects on a site of historical violence and the silence in its wake: "A long time since the last scream cut short—/ Then an unnatural silence; and then/ A natural silence". The tourists arrive "as if we were the first visitors". Though nowadays "the whole island is a bird sanctuary" where "amazed/ Oneiric species whistle" and "they are through with history", the poem registers it not only as a sanctuary but a place of political atrocity, of failed sanctuary. It measures its "natural silence" against the "unnatural silence" of the opening.

In the last stanza, we get the long view back: "A long time since the unspeakable violence—/ Since Somhairle Bui, powerless on the mainland,/ Heard the screams of the Rathlin women/ Borne to him, seconds later, upon the wind". The reference is to a typically brutal episode during the Earl of Essex's governorship of Ulster, part of his campaign to subjugate the province and defeat the astute Gaelic chieftain Sorley Boy McDonnell (or "Somhairle Bui Mac Dónaill", 1505-90), who aspired to be lord of the Glens. In July 1575 an English fleet under Captain Norris attacked a castle on Rathlin, harbouring old people, women and children, including Somhairle Bui's wife and children. The garrison eventually surrendered on condition their lives were spared, but on 26 July, as Sir Henry Sidney reported: "The soldiers, being moved and much stirred with the loss of their fellows that were slain, and desirous of revenge, made request, or rather pressed, to have the killing of them, which they did all... There were slain that came out of the castle of all

sorts 200... and have slain that they have found hidden in caves and in the cliffs for the sea to the number of 300 or more." Essex reported that Somhairle "stood upon the mainland of the Glynnnes and saw the taking of the island, and was like to run madde for sorrow (as the spy saith), turning and tormenting himself, and saying that he had then lost all that ever he had." The island, having lost all the population that it had, was deserted for centuries afterwards.

What might have been merely an account of a picturesque moment on a tourist's relaxed itinerary becomes something else—not via a bridge to elsewhere, but to Irish history. Above all it is a poem about silence, noise and utterance in a place associated with atrocity. The poem opens with a "last scream" which is "cut short" (an extraordinary condensation of the massacre into its interrupted final cry). The "unnatural silence" that follows is succeeded by a "natural silence" "slowly broken" by birds, then the "sporadic/ Conversation" of crickets until "the report/ Of an outboard motor at the pier". The word "report" here detonates a powerful pun. Though its prime meaning must be (as the *OED* puts it) "a resounding noise, esp. that caused by the discharge of fire-arms or explosives, 1590", its other meanings—of "rumour", "formal statement", legal "formal account of a case. argued", "firsthand testimony", "parliamentary report" hover in the air too. On the island now birds "whistle and chatter" while the "lone light... repeats/ One simple statement to the turbulent sea" (the sea associated with "the sea in winter" and the "esurient sea" of other recent poems). We then hear of the "unspeakable violence", the moment when the Gaelic chieftain hears "the screams of the Rathlin women", heard "seconds later, upon the wind" (Mahon's poem is exactly tuned to register such distances and delayed recognitions). That all happened "a long time since", the poem reports, but the one passing reference to the political present ("Bombs doze in the housing estates"), dissolves any comfort there might be in historical distance. The poem leaves us with "the cry of the shearwater" and the "roar of the outboard motor", which "Disturb the singular peace". This recalls "the tranquil place/ Its desolation almost peace" of "Derry Morning", framing "peace" as an aftermath of bloody historical violence between English and Gaelic cultures. If the noises of gull and motor are harmless, the words "cry" and "roar" are now primed with other resonances,

disturbing the miraculous peace of the island “sanctuary” the poem also recognises. In “Derry Morning”, the poet says “This is how the centuries work—/Two steps forward, one step back”, but here the poem ends with an even more disturbing arrest of historical progress in the present:

Spray-blind

We leave here the infancy of the race,
 Unsure among the pitching surfaces
 Whether the future lies before us or behind.

Again, I am reminded of Wordsworth, contemplating the aftermath of the September massacres in the Place de la Carrousel, when he says “the fear gone by/ Press’d on me like a fear to come”. “Rathlin” is Mahon’s equivalent of Munch’s “The Scream”—its “pitching surfaces”, pitching an oblique response, via the apparent detour of history, to the crises in “the housing estates”. The poem re-uses the ten-line stanza form of “A Disused Shed”, and, in its very different way, seeks to investigate the same persistence of the silenced past. Being “through with history” is not an option.

“North Wind: Portrush”, like “Derry Morning” and so many of Mahon’s poems, is a morning poem, with a sense of “the first day”. It too commemorates a sense of peace, albeit a chastened one (“The sea scarred but at peace”). This is “a false sense of reprieve”, however, and at the poem’s heart is a recognition of the North wind with its “high keen of a lost/ Lear-spirit in agony”. Portrush evokes in the poet images of Lear, “chaos and old night”, “stricken souls”, and “tempest” (“Prospero and his people/ Never came to these parts”, so this is a tempest without the romance of reconciliation seen in late Shakespeare). What gives these images currency, however, is their anchorage in the solid, dull bourgeois world dazzlingly evoked in the poem’s neatly packaged stanzas:

But the shops open at nine
 As they have always done,
 The wrapped-up bourgeoisie
 Hardened by wind and sea.
 The newspapers are late
 But the milk shines in its crate.

Everything swept so clean
 By tempest, wind and rain!
 Elated, you might believe
 This was the first day—
 A false sense of reprieve,
 For the climate is here to stay.

The original epigraph was from Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World* ("If I had gone to live elsewhere in the world, I should never have known that this particular morning... continues, will always continue to exist") and the stoical bleakness of Portrush is both measured as an elsewhere, "a string of lights on the prom" glimpsed by a passing ship on its way somewhere else, and against the "Elsewhere" of the "olive grove", "Blue skies and mythic love". What is exhilarating is the poem's combination of seaside-resort realism ("But the milk shines in its crate"), the kind of thing you might associate with Larkin who in "Aubade" has "The milkmen go from door to door", and an almost visionary choric exaltation ("Here only the stricken souls/ No high wind can disturb"). Returning to the primal scene of "The Sea in Winter", it is caught enigmatically between satirical critique of the "wrapped-up bourgeoisie" and a tragic identification with "hearts starved with frost/ Through countless generations". Saying "the climate is here to stay" is a banal enough conclusion, if its just about bad weather. It *is* a poem about weather, of course, and a brilliant one, but it also evokes what Auden calls a "whole climate of opinion", a Northern Ireland mind set, which it would be trivial to attribute only to meteorological conditions. The "plaintive voice", choiring forever and "blasting the subtler arts", sounds out from the poem, with an icy mixture of violence, elegy and rebuke, and if it seems to whistle off the "black face of the cosmic dark", it also seems to give baleful voice to the intractable condition of Ulster.

In "Craigvara House" from *Antarctica*, first published alongside the interview, Mahon looks back at his personal crisis in Ulster from a position of hindsight. It takes its title from the bungalow Mahon rented in Portrush in 1978, with its "frayed/ chintz, cane chairs and faded/ watercolours of Slemish and Fair Head". Mahon describes it in "The Coleraine Triangle" as: "a pleasant whitewashed house with flaking pilasters at the front

door and a magnificent sea view. From the windows where I write I look eastwards along the shore to the ruins of Dunluce Castle (once a MacDonnell stronghold) and the Giant's Causeway. Slightly to my right is the Royal Portrush golf course, slightly to my left the Atlantic ocean, with a scattering of rocky islands called the Skerries between me and Scotland. Earth has not anything to show more fair."

The poem is about an alcoholic "crack-up", like Fitzgerald's (to whom he alludes), and existential crisis, like that suffered by Sartre's Roquentin:

A mist of spray
 hung over the shore all day
 while I slumped there re-reading *La Nausée*

or watched a cup
 turn mantra on a tabletop
 like Scott Fitzgerald after the crack-up;

or knocked a coal,
 releasing squeaky gas until
 it broke and tumbled into its hot hole.

The Anglo-French rhyme is miraculously apposite and incongruous at the same time, placing the "slumped" poet as something like the "make-believe existentialist" he presents himself as in the later "Dawn at St Patrick's", taking his bearings once again by Sartre's murky post-Cartesian "study of alienation", the book Mahon said in a review the following year was "mother's milk to a generation". The reference to Fitzgerald's confessional story (added in *Selected Poems*, 1991) implicitly connects the poet's "black nights" not only to "anomie" and alienation but alcoholic break-down (the idea of the winter rain "quenching a great thirst" draws some of its force from the same logic). Looking over the "moonlit basalt cliff", he sees "huts with commandments painted on the roof", as "rain wept down/ the raw slates of the town,/ cackling maniacally in pipe and drain." This is a Protestant Ulster of flats with sea-views, rain and roofs inscribed with the ten commandments, its banality underscored with that touch of melodramatic madness ("cackling maniacally") that suggests the poet's own desperation. When earlier he

says “the wind made harpstrings on the sea” (a metaphor with a visual as well as aural dimension, suggesting the ripple of plucked harpstrings as well as the sound they produce), it sets up a distant echo of Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode”, with its windharp and “the scream/ Of agony by torture lengthened out/ That lute sent forth”, played apparently by some “Mad Lutanist”. *Antarctica* also included a charged four-line poem called “Dejection” (now re-named “Dejection Ode”), which takes up the storm imagery of Coleridge’s poem (crossing it with Randall Jarrell), asking “Must I stand out in thunderstorms again/ Who have twice come in from the cold?” Like Coleridge’s poem, “Craigvara House” is about recovering from a crisis of writing as well as living, about coming in from the cold.

For Mahon’s poem, despite its bleak “elation touched with fear”, is about personal and poetic recovery. In the review I mentioned, Mahon offers a pungent summary of Sartrean existentialism as follows: “You exist before you become, as a contingent blob to be transformed or not as you wish”. He then described the aim of the Frenchman’s avowedly autobiographical philosophy as “to create a figure from the blob... and to help it to walk unaided”. If Roquentin’s ontological crisis is precipitated by recognising the unspeakable heaviness of being and otherness of things—as represented by his encounter with the root of a tree—the poem suggests that Mahon found his way out of dejection by a quasi-religious encounter with objects and places. For the cracked-up poet a cup turns “mantra” on the table-top, becoming some kind of “Hindu or Buddhist incantation”, and “slowly” his chintz-filled living-room becomes an “ashram”, “a place of religious retreat or hermitage”, in which, presumably, the poet can get in touch with the Buddhist or Hindu “karma” he found so lacking in the “bad” Protestantism of his home province. There at any rate, holed up for the winter without phone or television, he comes to a “new-won knowledge of my situation”:

and it was there,
choosing my words with care,
I sat down and began to write once more.

When snowflakes
wandered on to the rocks
I thought, home is where the heart breaks—

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and it was there,
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When snowflakes
wandered on to the rocks
I thought, home is where the heart breaks—

the lost domain,
 of weekends in the rain,
 the Sunday sundae and the sexual pain.

This is the same North Antrim coast that was the site of the childhood holidays evoked in “The Last Resort” in “Autobiographies”. Re-described here as “the lost domain/ weekends in the rain”, it is identified as the place where he “sat down and began to write once more”. And it is the thought that “home is where the heart breaks” that appears to free him up to write, as he gets in touch once more with the defining desires and disappointments of adolescence (wittily crystallised in the painfully punning alliterative line “The Sunday sundae and the sexual pain”) and “home”.

The relation between “home” and writing, though, is inherently problematic. In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990), written with Peter Fallon, Mahon wrote that “the word most frequently dwelt on in this selection... is probably “home”, as if an uncertainty exists as to where that actually is”. “Ought we to have stayed at home/ wherever that might be?”, Elizabeth Bishop asked in “Questions of Travel”, and in “Craigvara House”, the heart-breaking definition of “home” remains geographically unspecific. The poem finds him staring “at a glow of yellow light/ over the water”, where in Magilligan army camp and prison “the interned sat tight” (those imprisoned without trial as suspected IRA terrorists after the introduction of internment in 1971). This gives the definition of “home” a grim political resonance, given the contest over notions of homeland in Northern Ireland at the time (the “yellow” light” had been “orange” in the *Poetry Ireland* version). In parenthesis, the poet says in his “own prison” he envies their “solidarity and extroversion”, revealing that the flat is not only “ashram” but “home” and “prison”. We might question this loaded identification of the writer in residence with the interned (the inmates of Magilligan would probably have been happy enough to change places), but the allusion to farms “with dreadful faces throng’d and fiery arms” suggests why. The words are from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, but they are the final lines of De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, a story, like Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-up”, about the nightmare legacy of

addiction. De Quincey speaks (misleadingly) of being cured of addiction but finding his dreams “still tumultuous, and, like the gates of Paradise to our first parents when looking back from afar, it is still (in the tremendous line of Milton)—‘With dreadful faces throng’d and fiery arms’”.

The poem ends, though, with the poet saying he had found “the frequency I had been looking for/ and crossed by night/ a dark channel” (an evocation of his first book, *Night-Crossing*), then woke to the sound of “a first thrush/ practising on a thorn bush/ a new air picked up in Marrakesh.” The expanding, three-line stanzas, with their triplet rhymes, create a wonderful step-or ripple- effect, giving the whole poem a very distinctive musical frequency, a kind of concentrated conversational *cantabile*. The thrush’s “new air” has been picked up in North Africa but needs “practising”; the poet is “entranced” (a word that in this moment of dawning insight seems to include the idea of an “entrance”), and generates a suitably subtle and entrancing music out of the set of local and exotic rhymes (“thrush”, “bush” and “Marrakesh”) interwoven with patterns of assonance, with the “s” sound in “slept” subtly whistling through “listened”, “entranced”, “pea-whistle”, “sound”, “first”, and “practising” as well as the final rhymes. It is telling that the re-discovery of poetry offers him once more a way of crossing the “dark channel”, keeping his eye “focused upon a flickering pier-light”, and leaving his “home” in Northern Ireland. The thrush’s “new air” is picked up elsewhere (in Marrakesh), and it seems that for Mahon art is intimately involved with contact with other places—a means of escape from “where the heart breaks”. The poem opens with a reference to the year of “black nights”, goes on to evoke a “night crossing” and ends with a direct address to his wife as he steps “out into the sunlight”, “as if we might/ consider a bad night/ as over”. The “as if” acknowledges the precarious status of his recovery and his wife’s return, but within the space of the poem, if not in life, the poet generates an exhilarated sense of a new beginning, all the more alive for its intense sense of vulnerability.

The sense of autobiographical vulnerability is itself new in Mahon’s work and will return in later poems such as “Dawn at St Patrick’s” and *The Hudson Letter*. “Craigvara House” was in fact published the year the Mahons’ marriage came to an end, and on the threshold of a creatively empty period as far as orig-

inal poetry was concerned. It looks back from 1985 to the “year/ of the black nights and clear/ mornings” in 1978/9, when he started to write once more, opening out the rich vein of poems about both the North and “elsewhere”, which bore harvest in *The Hunt by Night* and *Antarctica*, written in the intervening six years. They bear the scars of that return to the North as well as the inspiration of crossing “a dark channel”. This channel refers, among other metaphorical possibilities, to the actual channel between Northern Ireland and England, but also to that between political and personal despair and art itself, the domain of metamorphosis.