

TRANSATLANTIC VISIONS IN THE POETRY OF DEREK MAHON

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Abstract: The paper intends to take stock of those poems of Derek Mahon which are connected with America in one way or another. Mahon's poetry includes several instances in which America (the USA, more precisely) is either the setting for his reflections on matters in Ireland or it is the focus of his scrutiny in its own right. As Mahon spent a considerable time in the US and has his own rather ingenious relation with his homeland, his American perspectives, short poems as well as longer sequences, carry interesting suggestions on the notion and the nature of place, a central category and concern in his poetry.

Key words: Derek Mahon – poetry – Irish poetry – contemporary poetry

In the last stanza of the poem "A Garage in Co. Cork" Derek Mahon asserts that "We might be anywhere but are in one place only" (Mahon, 1999, 131) and that this particular place is "One of the milestones of earth-residence" which possesses "a sure sense of its intrinsic nature." (ibid) The opening sentence indicates a strange relation with the concept of place as it renders it seemingly irrelevant yet at the same time of utmost importance, depending on where exactly emphasis is placed in the sentence. Insisting on the idea of being in *one* place (emphasis added), the significance of the place becomes a constituent of the concept itself, thus the undefined and vague "anywhere" is filled with meaning in the moment when it is named and identified as a precise location. The place, however, is also referred to as a "milestone" which is another concept with a rich set of ambiguities: it suggests not only a comfortably definable and defined location but implies the sense of movement as well which in turn destabilises the very idea of place itself. The possession of "a sure sense of its intrinsic nature" does not resolve the ambiguities of the category of place either – instead it further adds to the complexity of what constitutes the concept of place in the poetry of Mahon.

Indeed, it has become something of a critical commonplace to point out the importance of place in Mahon's poetry. Much has been said about the fact that Mahon's titles frequently contain a reference to place and that in spite of the rather accurate references to location the poems still appear placeless or displaced (cf. Corcoran, 2002, 231). A compendium of the

place-names in Mahon's poems would make a rather longish reading yet certain recurring items offer safe points of departure for a more profound assessment of the concept of place and in turn of certain particular locations too.

The word "anywhere" is in part an indication of the sense of displacement noted by various critics yet it is also a possible point of reference for a more general reflection on human experience. "We might be anywhere but are in one place only" is not only a remark on the notion of place but it is at once the best indication of Mahon's basic approach to human experience: the simultaneous presence of freedom and limitation does not allow for any clearly defined order of importance in the relation of the two concepts. This position comes to be reflected in his poems which display a strong degree of bifurcation – in particular in poems which have an American setting in terms of their composition yet which have frequent references to locations in Ireland or to Ireland itself as a location. This strategy sees one place in the matrix of another and introduces another basic term in Mahon's treatment of place, that of an "elsewhere". There is an interest in the particular location itself but it frequently evokes the presence of another place which is characterised by contrasting features, thus a sense of another reality is created, and the poet is in turn left suspended in between the actual location and the one evoked.

The poems with an American setting are based on private experience and they show a gradual change in their focus. The earliest such poem simply uses its location as an elsewhere, with little significance attributed to the particular place where it is composed. Later on increasingly more details of the actual location are involved which gives the impression of a shift of interest in the contemplation in favour of the contemplated place itself. The awareness of the other place, however, never escapes the attention of the poet and the distance between becomes a relevant concept with its implications of detachment, alienation and perspective. Though these concepts offer different contexts for interpretation, in the end distance proves to be a benevolent element: physical detachment no longer means simultaneous emotional detachment, moreover the speaker apparently settles in a position of attachment and belonging.

The earliest poem with an American location for its composition but with an Irish place in its focus is the short one entitled "Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass.". The title of the

poem underwent several revisions until it reached its present form in terms of the spelling of the name of the Irish location and it is this present version that immediately creates a contrast, and thus tension too, between what looks (and sounds) ancient and modern. The short poem evokes a memory of a scene in the West of Ireland – a scene of utmost perfection:

A dream of limestone in sea-light
Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.
Reflection in that final sky
Shames vision into simple sight;
Into pure sense, experience. (Mahon, 1999, 29)

This memory is recollected in the location identified in the title: the here and now of the poem is a North American setting yet it does not become anything more than a setting since it only serves to evoke the memory which is defined as the ultimate point of reference: “I clutch the memory still, and I / Have measured everything with it since.” (ibid)

Neil Corcoran justly notes that the dream “makes Inis Oírr acknowledgedly an imaginative construction, rather than an actually existent place in an idealised Irish West” (Corcoran, 2002, 232). Poetic renderings, however, are necessarily imaginative constructions and as such they are prone to nostalgic colourings of experience. Still, the poem manages to avoid the banality of cliché partly by its short and compact form and partly by the involvement of the balancing pole of the American location. The recollected past experience of another location and the speaker’s situation “Atlantic leagues away tonight” (Mahon, 1999, 29) are brought into a relation which ensures not only a contrast between the etalon and anything else but which lends a degree of credibility to the chosen measure by the distance that is between the two locations and consequently of the two kinds of experience.

The poem “The Globe in Carolina” (earlier the location was more precisely given as “North Carolina”) is another representative of the group of poems with an American setting for its composition. This poem functions in a somewhat different manner as the title refers to a relation between an object and a location instead of one between two locations. The concept of the globe, however, is one which is associated with spatial representation thus locations are involved in it. In accordance with this there is a shift in the poem from a simple and explicit reference to Ireland to a wider context yet the invocation of the ocean lying to the east of the

continent involves the presence of a continent beyond that as well, together with islands which belong to that particular continent.

The poem begins with the motif of the speaker spinning the globe and moves on to charter a complete journey from there: the scene of the speaker contemplating the spinning globe is replaced by the description of the process of nightfall. This is done in a parallel perspective: there is the larger scale of American topography and the smaller one of particular items in the room, opening the way for both general statements and for personifying elements of the contemplated scene. From this the speaker moves on to widen the scope of his gaze even further as the globe comes to be replaced by the planet itself, just to narrow his focus back down to the American continent again, though this time a more distant perspective is employed in order to include an outside point of reference in the form of the ocean to the east of it. At the end the itinerary is completed by a return to the actual location of the room with its broader though still immediate surroundings. The construction of the poem thus reflects the formal suggestions of the globe by returning to its starting point.

Hugh Haughton points out the poem's allegiances to Metaphysical poetry by the employment of the popular 17th century trope of the globe which offers a comfortable means of establishing parallels between macrocosm and microcosm (Haughton, 2002, 111-112). Mahon's reflections on such correspondences point even further as the globe is perhaps the most adequate trope for representing the arbitrary nature of representation itself and in turn that of the notion of orientation. Orientation needs definite points of reference but the infinite nature of the globe means that points of reference are necessarily arbitrarily chosen. The title of the poem establishes one such point of reference but the act of spinning the globe permits the unsettling of that initial act and the speaker turns towards creating another by referring to a particular person's location beyond "an ocean to the east" (Mahon, 1999, 142), moving from the abstract sphere to a more concrete and palpable one.

The concept of the globe, however, also suggests the limits of representation as the details and variety characterising a given place are not rendered (are not possible to render for practical reasons) on a globe, leaving space only for a general sense to be represented. This is an implicit acknowledgement of the idea that place matters and that the given place has its own importance – a place represented by a simple name comes to life and acquires meaning only when it is filled with details of specific significance. The Mahonian "anywhere" becomes

the “one place”, with an insistence on “one” and with that “sure sense of its intrinsic nature” in this way. This idea is echoed in another poem entitled “A Lighthouse in Maine” (which, however, was not chosen to feature in the *Collected Poems*):

It might be anywhere –
Hokkaido, Mayo, Maine;
But it is in Maine. (Mahon, 1990, 143)

This is another instance of ambiguity as the “anywhere” is undermined by the “but” of the particular location yet Mahon’s choice of order in the phrasing of the idea supports the claims for significance of the given location.

The most extensive poem in which the location of composition is America is the sequence entitled “The Hudson Letter”. Published after a decade of silence, this poem marks a break with the earlier practice of the neatly composed tight forms which established Mahon as a traditionalist: the sequence is a verse letter of eighteen sections written in a looser form which is essentially based on couplets but occasionally departs from that pattern for its own reasons. The poem incorporates several epigraphs and is richly intertextual, which in the final analysis results in a highly self-reflexive sequence in which the sense of place receives further dimensions and the poet’s allegiances are more clearly defined than before.

The sequence was composed in New York during the poet’s residence in an apartment located not far from the river mentioned in its title. Mahon’s choice of the name of the river rather than that of the city for identifying the location of the composition of the poem has its significance from the point of view of the overall structuring of the sequence – rather than a set of static pieces the eighteen parts involve various moves which lead to a dynamism that allows for a wide range of observations many of which eventually focus on the figure of the poet himself. As a verse-letter composed in a looser and more discursive manner the sequence readily allows for the confessional mode. Mahon’s speakers are generally recognisable as highly autobiographical but in “The Hudson Letter” this is an even more apparent starting point. Unlike in the earlier poems with an American location the speaker faces and examines his own position too: though the poem abounds in minutely observed details of the actual physical location of the city, there is a conscious insistence on the status of the observer as an alien in that particular place. The status of the alien in turn hints at the concepts of exile and expatriation, concepts

heavily involved in Irish literature, yet Mahon carefully avoids the use of either of these terms in order to define his own context and position within that.

The sequence begins with an untitled section that offers the point of departure in every sense of the word: it takes stock of the surroundings, presenting an ideal escape for the poet's purposes, and outlines the task ahead with a mock-invocation as its conclusion. The time is winter, the river is frozen and this apparent suspension of time allows for contemplation. The thoroughly compiled details of metropolitan life give the impression of a tableau: the routines of diversity crammed into claustrophobic spaces become nearly unmoving and create the aura of permanence. The events are arrested exclusively in their own context, the perspective is that of an observer on the spot – there is no suggestion of anything else existing beyond the here and now of the scenes presented. It is this perspective that the third section entitled "Global Village" challenges: the frozen winter world is the only apparent and observable reality until the arrival of the news – suddenly the rest of the world is brought to life, giving rise to a meditation on the reality of the discourse that aspires to be reality. The critical consideration of the theoretical relation between signs and what they represent launches the speaker on a dangerous but inescapable course of facing his own status in that particular location.

The speaker's assessment of his own position follows a gradual progress. At first he is "an Irish bohemian" (Mahon, 1999, 190), then "an amateur immigrant" (ibid) and finally "an undesirable resident alien" (ibid). Each of these terms insists on the simultaneous existence of two constituents, a place of origin and a place of presence and also on the fact that these two constituents are not identical nor could they ever become that. At the same time they also reflect an increasing degree of definiteness as the "bohemian" is replaced by an "immigrant" and finally a "resident alien", and the last of these terms expresses that precarious balance that Mahon finds the proper ground for self-definition both in general and in particular.

This section is also notable for its consideration of the concept of place in general. The attempts at self-definition involve their comments on place as well but there is more explicit consideration of the notion of place by the motif of the news. Though news may be understood as simulacra only, representations replacing reality itself, they still evoke places, and the technology of modern telecommunications allows for live coverage of any event, turning any place the 'neighbour' of any other and divorcing spatial from temporal distance.

Technology provides a readily consumable version of what was only available via the imagination in the world of “Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass.”.

Further sections in the sequence broaden the scope of contemplation. They include a pastiche letter by an Irish immigrant woman from the end of the 19th century, birthday letters for the poet’s daughter and son, a story from Ovid, an assessment of literary figures in transplanted environments, general reflections on art and artfulness, and meditations on the less favourable aspects of the city and its inhabitants. Some of these items, such as the pastiche letter and the section composed of street advertisements, contribute to the seemingly exotic atmosphere of the location as it is experienced by the speaker whose position as an alien inescapably evokes the familiar world of his origin with which his current location contrasts. The sections intended as birthday letters strongly suggest this presence of another place, yet it is the penultimate section which contains the most explicit references to the presence of polarity, the existence of an ultimate place of reference beyond the one in which the present is grounded.

The penultimate section is entitled “Imbolc” and it is a reflection on the move of John Butler Yeats to New York for the final years of his life. Having chartered the exotic territory the poet is back in his apartment, reading the elder Yeats’s letter to his son. The letter prompts him to contemplate the idea of a return to Ireland and the sight of an airplane directs his imaginary gaze back to his homeland beyond the Atlantic, to “that land of the still-real” (Mahon, 1999, 218). The vision immediately follows:

I can see the old stormy island from the air,
its meteorological gaiety and despair,
some evidence of light industry and agriculture,
familiar contours, turfsmoke on field and town; (ibid)

His definition of himself takes a new form as he identifies himself as a “recovering Ulster Protestant” (ibid) and his envisioned return is completed by an outline of a possible future of growing old at home after his mysterious sojourn in foreign realms. Before turning his attention back to the letter and its context the coming of spring and the gradual rise of temperatures remind him of yet another familiar detail from home that in such weather “the

daffodils must be out in ditch and glen / and windows soon flung wide to the ‘small’ rain” (ibid).

In spite of all his attempts Mahon cannot avoid the use of the word “exile” at the end of this section, though he uses the comfortably distancing device of quotation marks for caging it. The presence of the word, however, and the lines describing his homeland become pivotal in the sequence: the degree of intimacy the chosen details suggest is a new element in the poem. The arresting of small but relevant detail contrasts with his keen observation of the American scene: even though the latter is more lavishly described, it never reaches that degree of familiarity that is involved in those details which refer to Ireland, and even the construction of that group of lines reflect this as the neutral and metropolitan sounding terms of “light industry and agriculture” are suddenly replaced by terms of “turfsmoke” and later “glen” that fit the described location more properly.

The concluding section of the sequence (entitled “The Small Rain”) follows the direction outlined in the preceding one as it focuses on the change of position from the earlier “let me out and let me go” to the “take me back and take me in” (Mahon, 1999, 220). The implication is that of coming home, of settling, which offers a neat and reassuring conclusion to the discursive journey of the poem. The motif of the journey, however, introduces another element of ambiguity as arrival in one place means the leaving behind of another, which in turn emphasises the transitory and temporary nature of everything that constitutes human life and its context. The decorations of the room to be vacated by the speaker suggest the wish of the speaker to counter and combat transience – the room is full of reproductions of various works of art, works which aspire for permanence but which at the same time make life all the more transient-looking. In such a context even the motif of arrival is only an apparent resting point:

... the voyage is never done
 for, even as we speak, somewhere a plane
 gains altitude in the moon’s exilic glare
 or a car slips into gear in a silent lane... (Mahon, 1999, 221-222)

Yet it is exactly this condition that calls for at least a temporary halt, a point of rest – something that a place may offer.

Mahon's shorter poems with an American location for their composition reflect something of a touch-and-go perspective. Comfortably located in an American setting the speaker of the poems can reflect on certain aspects of his identity, those which are anchored in a sense of place, yet the limited space of the poems does not allow for longish meditations on the matters considered. Such an opportunity is offered only in the more generous space of "The Hudson Letter" where the immediate surroundings and the burden of experience can play out their conflict over a wide field. Perhaps paradoxically "The Hudson Letter" can be read as something of a homecoming as a result – Neil Corcoran regards the position of the "resident alien" as the expression of the "sense of a temporarily anchored rootlessness" which is "the condition to which all Mahon's work aspires" (Corcoran. 2002, 243). The poem thus becomes something of a self-portrait as well (cf. Corcoran, 2002, 243) though a rather peculiar one: one that needs a proper location which is far enough from the sphere of interference of home.

Derek Mahon has expressed his sympathy for Louis MacNeice's position as a "tourist in his own country" and his own poetry is often regarded in the light of this statement, especially in relation to the category of place. "The Hudson Letter" in this way also evokes Philip Larkin's position in the poem entitled "The Importance of Elsewhere": being a stranger makes sense in a strange land but not at home. Mahon's poems, however, take an important step forward compared to this stance: being a stranger eventually creates its own pole of affection and belonging since each "elsewhere" requires an origin compared to which it is an elsewhere. Eventually "we might be anywhere but are in one place only."

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