

**“BRING OUT ARTISTS; TAKE MUSIC, OR THE CALM LIGHT OF DUTCH INTERIOR ART ...”:
DEREK MAHON’S PICTORIAL POEMS ¹**

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Derek Mahon could well make his own the concluding line by Seamus Heaney in “Personal Helicon”: “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing”.² Much of Mahon’s poetry is indeed, in his own words, “a pure, self-referential act” (“Sunday Morning,” *CP*, 127).³ And the sort of intimate darkness he tries to explore is twofold. It is first a complicated attachment to his native Belfast and Northern Ireland, a dominant complex that leads to a strong sense of homelessness and a symmetrical obsession with “place” as expressed in “Spring in Belfast”: “One part of my mind must learn to know its place.” (*CP*, 13)⁴ Mahon is secondly obsessed with the mystery of creation and of his own creativity, which once set him apart: “I was born odd, a slip of the pen.”⁵

This twofold quest for place and self-revelation as a poet embarks Mahon on endless cultural and intellectual peregrinations and fills him with an omnivorous appetite for other works of art. As Hugh Haughton notes: “Mahon is a highly allusive poet, with an investment in many forms of intertextuality, including quotation, translation, adaptation, mimicry, ekphrasis and revision.”⁶ As such, Mahon’s poetry is full of aesthetic panache, opulent as it is with erudite and eclectic references to

¹ Derek Mahon, “Shopenhauer’s Day,” *The Yellow Book*, Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1997, 20.

² Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*, Dublin: Faber and Faber, 1990, 9.

³ All page references are to Derek Mahon’s *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1999), abbreviated “*CP*,” or to Derek Mahon’s *Selected Poems* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991), abbreviated “*SP*,” unless otherwise stated.

⁴ As Terence Brown suggests, this alienated mind set Mahon on endless peregrinations: “It is as if Belfast is entered in his world as the obverse of poetry, as a manifestation of a version of modernity which induces deracination, as the place that set him wandering to the many locations that over four decades have engaged his restless, peregrine imagination.” (Terence Brown, “Mahon and Longley: Place and Placelessness,” in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 134).

⁵ William Scammell, “Derek Mahon Interviewed,” *Poetry Review*, 81(2), Summer 1991, 6.

⁶ Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 3.

painters, musicians, philosophers and famous writers. Of course, ostentation and ornament are not the purpose of so much intertextuality. Those works serve as mirrors to Derek Mahon. In other words, to “reflect *upon* himself,” he consistently “reflects *himself*” into other texts or *artifacts*.

What interests me here is how Mahon invests a series of paintings, how his verbal/poetical texts interact with those iconic texts and to what extent self-positioning and self-exegesis are made possible through intermediation—that is, through the interface of two mediums, words and images.

Intermediation seems immediately very apt to achieve self-revelation. In “Sunday Morning,” Mahon creates a neologism to emphasize the instrumental function of pictures in his creation: “[...] I prow/ [...] Among the kite-fliers and fly / The private kite of poetry – / A sort of winged sandwich board / El-Grecoed to receive the word” (*CP*, 126). Similarly, in “The Drawing Board,” what Mahon calls the “deal table”—that is, not only the pine board or plank where he writes but also metaphorically the table where the business of creation is negotiated (“The Studio,” *CP*, 36 and “Courtyards in Delft,” *CP*, 105)—partakes equally of word and image: it is both a “drawing” board and a “talking” board as implied in the successive titles chosen for the poem, “Table Talk,” in its original version; “The Drawing Board,” in the definitive edition of Mahon’s *Collected Poems*. The poet “makes sense” and his pen is made “reflective” thanks to this twofold “indispensable medium” which addresses him in the following terms:

And yet I love you, even in your ignorance,
 Perhaps because at last you are making sense –
 Talking to me, not through me, recognizing
 That it is I alone who let you sing
 Wood music; hitherto shadowy and dumb,
 I speak to you now as your indispensable medium. (*CP*, 125)

Most of Mahon’s picture poems were written in the early 1980s and were the title poems of two of the three main collections of that period: *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), *The Hunt by Night* (1982) and *Antartica* (1986).

“Courtyards in Delft” (*CP*, 105-6), which reads as an autobiographical reflection on childhood, originated in the contemplation of Pieter de Hooch’s painting *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* on exhibit in the National Gallery in London. In fact, the poem revolves around the adjective “mnemonic” which heralds the sudden intimate epiphany of the fourth stanza: “I lived there as a boy” in which “there” ubiquitously stands for 17th century Holland and Northern Ireland in the 1940s. Mahon reacts

emotionally to the domestic utopia depicted by the Dutch painter and his diction reveals that he sees this space as fundamentally artificial, in the sense of double-faced. The first two stanzas describe the two sides of the same coin. This space is characterized by its “trim composure”: its impeccable cleanliness and proper arrangement are translated into adjectives (“immaculate,” “thrifty,” “house-proud,” “modest,” “adequate” or “chaste”) and echoed by the soft musicality of the first stanza with its elegant partita of rhymes—an alternation of [I] and [aI] sounds in the opening line; the internal rhyme between “trite” and “light”; the aural palindrome between “light” and “tile”; the play on “trim” and “trees.” But so clean and tidy a place proves claustrophobic and stifling: the methodological itemization of all the objects excluded from the scene in the second stanza (whose syntax rests on anaphoric negations) and the exclamation “Yet this is life too” (l.21) hint at domestic priggishness and restraint. This absence of life becomes “vividly mnemonic” precisely because it is perfectly consonant with Mahon’s own experience as a boy. Mahon recognizes in de Hooch’s courtyard the Protestant ethos that presided over his parents’ home, an ethos encapsulated in the engraved inscription above the archway which reads in Dutch: “This is the Saint Jerome’s vale, if you wish to retire to patience and meekness. For we must descend if we wish to be raised – 1614.”⁷ The vividness of Mahon’s stereoscopic vision is felt in many ways, but especially in a correspondence of light effects: the gleaming lights of the picture (“oblique light,” “immaculate,” “sunlit railings”) give way to the soft iridescence of Mahon’s memories (“glittering,” “late afternoon lambency,” “radiant spoon”). Through the mediation of de Hooch’s image, Mahon captures his Belfast childhood dominated by “the feeling there was something very wrong with the environment,” by “the feeling that all roads were cul-de-sacs and an atmosphere of unhealthy introspection.”⁸ Mahon moves even further in his retrospective introspection as this moment of vision radiates into a number of associated images: among them are personal images hinting at his sense of alienation—he was “a strange child” different from his “hard-nosed companions” and trusted his creative outlook to escape his constrictive environment. The last stanza also records communal images that intertwine references to Holland’s colonial past in South Africa (with “veldt”) and Northern Ireland’s troubled past—in particular, the Williamite Wars (with “gorse”). The ultimate appropriation of de Hooch’s painting by the poet is manifested in the distortion of its lines. The oblique but straight lines upon which the picture relies become the curved lines of memory: “the sunlit railings” are replaced by the distorted beams of the ceiling on the polished surface of a spoon (l.28).

⁷ Walter Liedtke, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, 282.

⁸ Serge Fachereau, “Derek Mahon: Ecrire en Ulster,” *Lettres Nouvelles*, March 1973, 194.

“The Hunt by Night” (*CP*, 150-1) is no less epiphanic than “Courtyards in Delft,” but self-revelation does not come through such a moment of vision as we have just seen. Based on Paolo Uccello’s quattrocento masterpiece *The Hunt in the Forest* held in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Mahon’s poem is hardly descriptive but imitative or homologous; as such, it could be seen as Mahon’s own version of Horace’s dictum “*Ut pictura poesis*.” In fact, the perfect symmetry of Uccello’s scene is mirrored in the perfect symmetry of Mahon’s sestets rhyming *abcba*. Their concertina-shape even recalls the foliage of Uccello’s trees as in a calligram. Similarly, the superimposition of visual fields according to the rules of perspective in Uccello’s scene is reflected in Mahon’s poem in the mental comparison of three hunting scenes viewed in historical perspective—the neolithic hunt when man “killed to live”; the Renaissance hunt that sublimated the atavistic blood instinct into the “game” of hunting; and, finally, the poetical hunt, as adventurous and essential as the others. His poem is indeed about a form of filiation, defined as repetition and difference, each form of hunt being construed as a modified version of the earlier one. This particular construction (to construe) reveals itself in the construction (to construct) of the poem which opens in a cave and closes in another; which emphasizes such verbs as “to become” and to “mutate”; which tells of “echoes of the hunting horn” and rests on a number of such echoes, both semantic and phonetic: “lithe,” re-iterated as “slim,” “foetid” as “pungent,” “crazed” as “wild,” “howls” as “cries” on the one hand—“point” half-rhyming with “paint,” “fun” with “food” on the other hand. The duplication of Uccello’s visual perspective by temporal and analytical perspective is pushed even further. Depth of field is achieved in the poem through the choice of a series of words with a Latin origin (“neolithic,” “pageantry,” “peremptory,” “herbaceous”) endowing the poem with etymological amplitude. Of course, the maximum of amplitude and depth is reached, as in the painting, toward the middle of the poem with the phrase “diuretic depots” which is a magniloquent translation for “pissing places” and which is as distant as possible from its basic meaning. Altogether, Uccello’s florid depiction is mimicked by Mahon’s florid diction, and this virtuoso interface of word and image enables the latter to capture himself as a poet. The concluding lines of the poem leave us with a sense of achievement reinforced by the poet’s artful pun:

As if our hunt by night,
 [...] were not the great
 Adventure we suppose, but some elaborate
 Spectacle put on for fun
 And not for food. (*CP*, 151)

“Girls on the Bridge” (*CP*, 152-3), a poem contemporaneous to “Courtyards” and “The Hunt” inspired by two famous paintings by Edvard Munch (*Girls on the Jetty* and *The Scream*), strikes a less personal note but confirms the aptness of the word/image interface. The poem is built on dramatic irony: the poet as a sort of omniscient viewer addresses the girls in the painting and warns them against a latent threat, some adjacent violence to which they are tragically blind and deaf. The girls toss their hair “lightly” despite their intrinsic gravity; they are “content to gaze at the [...] reflective lake” although “the long shadows grow / And night begins to fall”; their “conversational quack” is “expressive of calm days / And peace of mind” despite its “plangent” overtones. Symptomatically, the poem offers not a literal description of Munch’s painting but a lateral view of it. The poet attracts the girls’ attention toward what is not visible in the picture and what lies outside the frame. As such, the poem is speculative (that is, based on conjecture) and discursive (that is, not only digressive but also conversational). So the poet points at visible but, above all, invisible frightening forces: the “crisp linen” and “sedate limbs” behind the walls of the distant house connote rigidity and death whereas the scream heard round the bend ahead evokes terror or extreme pain. The conversation between the poet and the girls, between poem and painting, ultimately results in a chromatic conversion of the eponymous picture. Whereas Munch’s painting *Girls on the Jetty* is full of variegated colors (blue, green, red, yellow) and conveys a sense of peace, Mahon’s poem refers to only two colors (black with “dark waters” and white with “ghastly sun”), in the same way as *The Scream* consists in a garish combination of dark blue and orange. In other words, as *Girls on the Jetty* is emotionally and chromatically subsumed by *The Scream*, Mahon allows us to feel the discordance between the psychological spaces mapped in Munch’s alienated paintings and positions himself as a decipherer, his word revealing—so to speak—Munch’s image.

In the light of those three poems, intermediation seems perfectly valid and stimulating. The word/image interface, which never consists in mere *ekphrasis* in Mahon’s poems, enables the poet to position and capture himself and to exercise his creative insight. Yet, although they are operative, the images that he invests prove not fully cooperative. In fact, they resemble the lighthouse that Mahon describes in “A Lighthouse in Maine”: they keep as much as they give:

Though built to shed
Light, it prefers
To shelter it, as it does

Now in the one-bird hour
Of afternoon, a milky
Glare melting the telephone poles.

It works both ways,
 Of course, light
 Being, like love and the cold,

Something that you
 Can give and keep
 At the same time.

Night and day it sits
 Above the ocean like
 A kindly eye, keeping

And giving the rainbow
 Of its many colours
 Each of them white. (*SP*, 142-3)⁹

In other words, the position and self-representation that Mahon manages to achieve through the word/image interface appear partly illusory because the paintings resist his intrusion in many ways. The poet cannot invest them fully and experiences the reticence of his pictorial medium.

A second look at Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft" and "Girls on the Bridge" indeed reveals that Mahon's gaze stumbles against a fundamental enigma at the heart of both paintings. He can see everything in them, except one essential thing which is evidentially situated at the geometrical center of both his poems and the paintings. He cannot see what de Hooch's "girl with her back to us" is seeing, nor can he tell about the exact vision of the girls whose heads are averted in Munch's piece. In one case, Mahon can at best speculate on the return of a lover; in the other, he is undone by the "unplumbed" surface of the lake. So staring him in the face, there is a missing element in those pictures. And it seems that all the latter's attractive power ultimately lies in this missing element. The poet's gaze can circulate within and outside the pictures—de Hooch's painting depicts open doors and windows whereas Munch's sandy road winds up out of the frame—but Mahon's gaze falls and freezes on one nodal point: the void of meaning inside the picture.

The case of "The Hunt by Night" is even more striking. Following the rules of linear perspective, all the diagonal lines of trees, horses and hounds receding into the distance converge toward the center

⁹ This poem is inspired by Edward Hopper's painting *A Lighthouse at Two Lights*, 1929, Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

of the picture and a vanishing point. The group of stags that the hunting party is chasing is disappearing into the forest, precisely into this vanishing point. The prey is there, it may be imagined and even smelt (“pungent prey”), but it is certainly not visible. Therefore the hunt is suspended to the conjecture of a presence and Mahon’s own hunt is accordingly suspended. The blind point in the middle of the picture turns out to be a blinding point and the poet cannot but admit that his hunt has begun but is “not yet done.” In other words, the structural obliteration of the prey in Uccello’s picture makes Mahon’s literal (that is, verbal) self-elucidation half-successful. The part in the image that cannot be articulated (that is, properly connected to a meaningful whole) makes the poet partially inarticulate.

What Mahon experiences here, the capture of his gaze and his being literally dumbfounded—that is, so surprised as to be unable to speak—are typical of a phenomenon described by Jacques Lacan in the chapter dedicated to sight in *Le Séminaire XI* or by Gérard Wajeman in an article titled “La Vie privée d’une œuvre d’art.” Lacan—and Wajeman in his wake—underscores that our sight is at risk when looking at a picture, that pictures are eye-catchers. They look at us as much as we watch them and we may always be taken in by them unawares:

Dans le tableau, toujours se manifeste quelque chose du regard.¹⁰

Dans le champ scopique, tout s’articule entre deux termes qui jouent de façon antinomique—du côté des choses [des tableaux] il y a le regard, c’est-à-dire que les choses [les tableaux] me regardent, et cependant je les vois.¹¹

L’art [...] se rapporte en essence à cette haute visée de se saisir du regard avant de lui donner quoi que ce soit à voir.¹²

Où « commence » l’œuvre ? [...] où finit-elle ? pour la première [question] on aura répondu: l’œuvre commence dans sa présence visible. Quant à la seconde, elle demandera encore un peu de chemin car il s’agit de penser ceci : que le manque peut appartenir à une œuvre, voire en être le centre, pire : qu’il peut être constituant.¹³

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil, 1973, 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹² Gérard Wajeman, “La Vie privée d’une œuvre d’art,” *La Part de l’œil n°1—Dossier Arts plastiques et psychanalyse*, 1985, 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

The poet experiences that pictures have a separate life, if only because they withhold meaning from him, if only because his desire to see through them is not fulfilled and his gaze not exactly returned. The existence of a non-elucidated part in the painting makes him hostage and puts him back in his place—that is, as an external viewer who is necessarily at a distance.

“Saint Eustace” (*SP*, 144), first published in *Antartica*, offers the clearest example of this fact. Inspired by Pisanello’s work of the same title, the poem dramatizes the legend of the Roman Placidus and his conversion through a vision of a crucified Christ on the antlers of the deer he had been hunting. This poem is all about sight with an accumulation of words related to vision (“mild-eyed,” “stares,” “blind,” “vision”) but certainly not the poet’s vision. His personal quest is doomed right from the beginning—“The hunt ceases / Here” (l.1-2)—and the poem consists in a story told exclusively in the third-person singular in excess from that unequivocal incipit. Mahon cannot position or reflect himself at all in Pisanello’s picture, although it is clear that it is intimately meaningful to him. If Placidus’ nemesis was to be burnt “for his contumacy / And vision” (l.21-22), Mahon’s own nemesis is to be forced to stay outside the picture and to miss his vision.

What is striking is that this so-to-speak “short-sightedness” and forced eccentricity go hand in hand with the resurgence of the materiality of the paintings. When meaning becomes blurred or evades the poet’s grasp, when the word/image interface fails, when diction falls short as it falls on elliptical depiction, the very texture of the pictures becomes glaringly visible. Or, to say things differently, the hermeneutic evasion of the pictorial medium corresponds to its organic (material) emergence. This is particularly true in the case of “The Hunt by Night” and “Courtyards in Delft.” In the first poem, the vanishing point is qualified as being “Masked by obscurities of paint” (l.28). Likewise, the girl in de Hooch’s scene is said to be waiting “till the paint disintegrates” (l.19). This again is typical of the visual aporia described by Jacques Lacan in *Le Séminaire XI*:

En tant que je suis sous le regard, je ne vois plus l’œil qui me regarde, et si je vois l’œil, c’est alors le regard qui disparaît. [...] Tout tableau est un piège à regard. Dans quelque tableau que ce soit, c’est précisément à chercher le regard en chacun de ses points que vous le verrez disparaître.¹⁴

In other words, the more Mahon tries to catch the vision that evades him, the harder he stumbles over the artifact—that is, over the art object or the screen that this object represents.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Op. Cit.*, 97 and 102-3.

This might be taken as a complete failure except if one considers, like Mahon himself, that a piece of art is both "the thing and the thing made" ("Courtyards in Delft," *CP*, 105), that the materiality of the work of art is as important as the act that created it, that something of this act may be perceived in this materiality.

In "Shapes and Shadows," his latest picture poem, Mahon emphasizes the telltale dimension of the painting as a "thing made" and the community of creation that he can feel as an artist viewing the paint—taken both as the colored substance spread over the canvas and the act of painting. This poem, first published in *Collected Poems*, is inspired by a painting by William Scott held in the collections of the Ulster Museum in Belfast. It tells of the evolution of Scott's art from a representational to an abstract style, from still lifes of kitchen scenes to paintings exploring non-figurative forms and textures within a bare compositional space. Accordingly, Mahon's piece moves from alluding to "known structures" with a definite shape and color ("blue frames," "black kettle and black pot," "skinny beans and spoons," etc.) to referring to "ghosts of colour and form," then to listing all sorts of organic and mineral materials whose sole common characteristic is to be white or off-white: "snow, ash, whitewash, / limestone, mother-of-pearl, / bleach, paper, soap and foam, / top-of-the-milk cream" (*CP*, 278-9). But what fascinates Mahon in his mimicking Scott's artistic development is to reflect upon the work of the painter's hand and to meditate upon the materiality of the medium—he thus accurately notices the "tension of hand," the "knifed and scrubbed" canvas, the "rough brushwork," the "surfaces and utensils." His conclusion is that there is an intimate community between the painter's brush leaving marks on the canvas and the writer's pen darkening a white page:

Rough brushwork here, thick
but vague; for already
behind these there loom
shades of the prehistoric,
ghosts of colour and form,
furniture, function, body –

as if to announce the death
of preconception and myth
and start again on the fresh
first morning of the world
with snow, ash, whitewash,
limestone, mother-of-pearl,

bleach, paper, soap and foam,
 top-of-the-milk cream,
 to find in the nitty-gritty
 of surfaces and utensils
 the shadow of a presence,
 a long-sought community. (*CP*, 278-9)

That all the listed materials should be white is not at all fortuitous and hints at Mahon's obsession with the white page and its organic resistance, doubled by the resistance of the poet's special utensils—words—whose selection and combination is both erratic and groping: "I stare at the blank spaces, / Reflecting the composure / Of patient surfaces – / I who know nothing / Scribbling on the off-chance, / Darkening the white page, / Cultivating my ignorance." ("The Attic," *CP*, 111).

What the emergence of materiality thus reveals is that meaning resides in the resistance of the artist's medium, should the artist be a writer or a painter: "This is," Mahon says, "where we quote Raymond Chandler's dictum 'No art without the resistance of the medium.' But that resistance must not be gratuitously imported for tactical purposes. It must be organic."¹⁵ This resistance—which shows in Mahon's endless revising work on his own poems—is precisely so real, so substantial, so vigorous that the medium seems alive, as suggested by the surreal dialogue between the poet and his desk in "The Drawing Board":

[...] During your long
 Labours at me, I am the indulgent wood,
 Tolerant of your painstaking ineptitude.
 Your poems were torn from me by violence;
 I am here to receive your homage in dark silence.
 [...]
 The hurt I do resent, and my consolation
 Will be the unspoiled paper when you have gone. (*CP*, 125)

The vigor of the resistance is also illustrated by the fantastic vision that Mahon conjures up in "The Studio," a vision of artistic fiasco resulting from the sudden mutiny of the objects of creation:

¹⁵ Eamon Grennan, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry," *Paris Review*, 42, Spring 2000, 154.

You would think with so much going on outside
The deal table would make for the window,
The ranged crockery freak and wail
Remembering its dark origins, the frail
Oil-cloth, in a fury of recognitions,
Disperse in a thousand directions
And the simple bulb in the ceiling, honed
By death to a worm of pain, to a hair
Of heat, to a light snowflake laid
On a dark river at night – and wearied
Above all by the life-price of time
And the failure by only a few tenths
Of an inch but completely and for ever
Of the ends of a carefully drawn equator
To meet, sing and be one – abruptly
Roar into the floor. (*CP*, 36)

The photograph of Edvard Munch’s studio in Oslo which inspired Mahon for this poem addresses also, in its own intriguing way, the materiality of creation.¹⁶ Despite the immaterial and expressionistic intrusion of bright sunlight in the room, the image represents all the concrete mess of creativity and several canvases, which are the products of that creativity. Rather than paintings being presented in isolation (as individual works on a wall in a gallery or in a discussion in a book), rather than invaluable acts of genius, they appear disorderly as the tentative works of a skilled but hardworking craftsman. The studio thus implies the work and context of creation. As such, it is the painter’s equivalent of the poet’s deal table, the locus of a struggle in which the furniture (like the pine board) serves as medium for artistically expressed feelings:

This is the all-purpose bed-, work- and bedroom.
Its mourning faces are cracked porcelain only quicker,
Its knuckles doorknobs only lighter,
Its occasional cries of despair
A function of the furniture. (*Ibid.*)

¹⁶ Originally titled “On a Photograph of Edvard Munch’s Room in Oslo,” then simply “Edvard Munch,” the poem echoes a photograph taken in 1925.

The cryptic line that opens the poem—"You would think with so much going on outside"—gives an additional dimension to the context of creation and powerfully articulates Mahon's two obsessions: his complex attachment to Ulster and his fascination for the arcane process of creation. Both Munch's messy studio and Mahon's resisting deal table imply a kind of reality that does not find its way into the paintings or the poems. The mess of the painter's studio stands behind his paintings and shapes them in some sense although it does not show in them; similarly, the "mess" of Northern Ireland, its violent history, stands behind Mahon's poems and shapes them but obliquely, from without. What Mahon's pen verbalizes and sketches is the struggle "in here," hardly ever the struggle "out there"; like the painter's brush, his pen delineates and selects.

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