

The Rooted Dweller: Paradoxes of Exile and Homecoming in the Poetry of Derek Mahon

Hend Hamed Ezzeldin*

Ain Shams University, Egypt

Corresponding Author: Hend Hamed Ezzeldin, E-mail: hendhamed@alsun.asu.edu.eg

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ABSTRACT

Exile is not a singular phenomenon but rather a varied and a heterogeneous one. The term exile generally denotes displacement which refers to a movement out of one's original place, be it imposed or by one's choice. The theme of exile is pervasive in Irish literature reflecting the isolation felt by Irish writers who regarded themselves displaced at their very home and uprooted from earth per se. Many critics maintained that this intense sense of un-belonging to any place is translated into the logic of 'colonial aphasia' from Derek Mahon whose poetry is conditioned by various types of exile. Failing to take a stance of what was happening in his homeland and to elucidate his cantankerous, dissociated feelings, Mahon's decision was to sever himself entirely from any home no matter what this 'home' incarnates. In one of his interviews, however, Derek Mahon expressed utter disapproval of being seen as an exile and made it explicit that this should not be the way to interrogate his writing. Even though much of his poetry testifies that he is a displaced writer in exile, deeper readings of his works would showcase various attempts at connecting with the world he seems to reject. This paper attempts to examine Mahon's occult sentiments towards his homeland, his people, and his vocation by delving into some of his major poems to illustrate his endeavors at association even if the poems reflect detachment and disconnection. In every poem, there is a sense of belonging - to a place, a people, or to one's self - despite the sweeping motifs of division and aloofness.

"Then the time of exile began, the endless search for justification, the aimless nostalgia, the most painful, the most heartbreaking questions, those of the heart which asks itself, where can I feel at home?" (Camus 70)

INTRODUCTION

A portent trope of modernity, the word exile carries a subtle contradiction. It denotes "banishment from a particular place in an institutional act of force" (Israel 1) but it also expresses a sense of "leaping out toward something or somewhere, implying a matter of will" (Israel 1). This abstruse contradiction is inherent in the idea of modernity itself where man is frequently forced to confront a sense of loss, alienation, and disorientation believing that socio-political seclusion is involuntary whereas it could be, as perplexing as it may seem, an unconscious voluntary action. The modern world is a place of fragmentation and especially for people who live in constant threats of war or colonization, such as Ireland. The Anglo-Irish struggle has become a key ideology of Irish literature which became per se a means of resistance and rejection to the status-quo.

Historically, "the Irish poet has seemed inescapably trapped in the dilemma of Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist*

as a Young Man, fretting out, in the shadow of a usurper's language, the contradictions of an unresolved cultural and political identity" (Smith 62). The Irish writer in general and the poet in specific, thus, came to be identified as a displaced individual inhabiting that "intercalated territory famously identified by Louise MacNeice as a condition of spiritual hyphenation" (Smith 62). This definition could be aptly applied to Derek Mahon who became suspicious of his reality: his identity, his homeland, and his origins. Welch explains that in the 19th century, it was common to invent as many Irelands as possible because "there was no Ireland, because there was no language, no system for it" (2). With the advent of modernity and all the passive concepts attached to it, the strategy was even more difficult to follow especially when man was skeptic of his ability to invent in the first place.

The convoluted socio-political situation in Northern Ireland made many people unaware of the stance they should take, or if they should take a stance at all. In Ulster, the Unionist community was primarily drawn from Protestant ideologies who favour maintaining the British connection and the Loyalists was the name given to those whose sense of Britishness is more firmly held. Hence, the problem of identity and to which side the individual should side with created an internal struggle that remains held until the present

moment. As early as his first volume, *Night Crossing*, Derek Mahon has publicized his intellectual dissent from the legacy of Northern Irish politics and his distance from the political narratives of British and Irish politics in his poetry. This dissent could be interpreted from two seemingly contrasting dimensions: as a key feature in his exile and rejection not only to the Irish society but to the entire globe, and also as a silent scream for recognizing analogies, celebrating connectivity, and realizing hopes. This paper attempts to highlight the paradox that seems to dominate his writings. In many of Mahon's poems, the speaker appears to be totally detached from his homeland and the feelings associated with it, whereas he finds himself unconsciously rooted, attached to the very ideas he struggles to neglect and deny.

THEORIZING EXILE

Most commonly, exile is defined as "banishment, a physical separation and a geographical dislocation from home enacted by a state's or regime's legal system" (Allatson 10). As aforementioned, exile could be imposed upon the individual or it could be my mere choice. This separation from one's homeland results in physical and psychic ramifications in relation to space and the concept of home per se. In his foregrounding essay 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said postulates that exile creates sadness and ontological estrangement as overarching consequences of the physical separation from a purported native place and the incurable rupture between the true self and its true home (137). Said points out that since Nietzsche, Western literary and philosophical responses to modernity have been focused on the theme of exile as a trope which characterizes a sense of agitation, disconnectedness, and "spiritual orphanhood" (137). He perpetuates that our modern age with its imperialism and "the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (Said *Reflections* 137-8). Said stresses that modernity creates a plethora of boundaries and frontiers between the self (us) and the other (outsiders) rendering humans refugees, i.e. totally displaced from the 'very' place to which they must belong. The word 'home', then, takes a more holistic profile encompassing not a specific country but the whole macrocosm. "The pathos of exile", Said explicates, "is in the loss of contact with the solidarity and the satisfaction of earth" (*Reflections* 142). Closely related to the idea of dislocation is the motif of non-belonging since the exile suffers from a sense of 'orphanhood' looking at every modern aspect through a lens of estrangement insisting on his/her right to reject to belong: "I speak of exile not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institution that dominate modern life" (Said *Reflections* 146). Thus, the exile begins his odyssey in search for a place that would accommodate his feelings of aloofness and loneliness.

Intellectual exile is another way of looking at the displacement one feels in his own home country. In his article "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals", Said introduces the intellectual who feels displaced in a society that totally abjures his way of thinking, the individual who "considers him – or herself to be a part of a more general

condition affecting the displaced nation community" (115). According to Said, such an individual will not be a source of illumination and acculturation, but rather a symbol of instability and volatility. Exile, in this sense, will therefore carry a metaphorical sense and would not only be refrained to those who were forced out of their countries. Even those intellectuals who remain in their countries could be divided into two sects: insiders and outsiders. Those who flourish and bloom in the society without feeling dissociated from its doings (the 'yea-sayers' as Said describes them) are the insiders. The outsiders, by contrast, are those 'nay-sayers', "the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned" (Said *Intellectual* 117). In this sense, the word 'exile' would have a metaphorical denotative meaning suggesting restlessness, instability, movement, and unsettlement. You "can't go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home: and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation" (Said *Intellectual* 117).

Wandering around in search for a home that was, the exile begins to construct fictive worlds "whose alterity or betweenness requires aesthetic rationales and poetic justice" (Edwards 20). George Steiner maintains that "it seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely" (qtd in Said *Reflections* 137). Via art, the exile feels free to create the place he wishes to live in and struggles to find a home to compensate for the disorienting loss and defeat he/she faces in the real world. The exile is well-aware that in the modern world, homes are not permanent. Borders and barriers, "which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity" (Said *Reflections* 147). Hence, the exile crosses these delusional borders, breaks these man-made barriers and resides in his home(s) of thought and experience. Odysseus who returns to Ithaca after many years of wandering is a good example. Ovid is another illuminating case who creates a serious link between poetic creation and exile. Seen in a heroic not in an urbane light, Ovid's poetry emphasizes on the "ambivalent nature of poetry, the isolation from community, and the vulnerability of human achievements" (Edwards 21). In his *Minima Moralia*, published in 1953 and subtitled "Reflections from Damaged Life", Theodore Adorno explicates: "for a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. But now he lacks a storeroom (...) In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing" (87-88). Adorno's views are too pessimistic, for he believes that the outsider intellectual will not be allowed to live in the fictive worlds he creates for he focuses on this outsider status as a pervasive feature of modern life. This suggests that the intellectual exile exists in a middling state, "neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half involvements and half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast

in another" (Said *Intellectual* 114). This inside-outside status is where Mahon stands.

MAHON'S EXILE

Born in Belfast, educated in Dublin, and moved restlessly between London and the United States, Derek Mahon is often concerned with the questions of home and identity. Having witnessed the Northern Irish troubles and the religiopolitical divisions in his country, he began to distance himself from his hometown both physically and mentally attempting to find a home to which he could peacefully belong. Cutting himself from his origins, Mahon's poems tended to be "existential lyrics written in response to the rupture of subject from object" (McConnel 194). This object is rather multifaceted including his Ireland, God, and even his poetry which he saw as nothing but a futile attempt to bridge the gaps between man and himself and man and his society.

Derek Mahon has never been positive of his place: where to belong and where to stay. He is usually identified as an outsider, an outcast, who subsequently dissociates himself from his homeland and its inhabitants. His Ulster Protestant origins "emerge in his poetry through conflicted, ambiguous emotions and a detached irony that conflates obligation, guilt, and a desire to be elsewhere" (Burton 34). In his interview with Eamonn Grennan, Mahon confided that for a large part of his life, he has been "terrified of home. [He thinks] that this has a great deal to do with what started happening in Northern Ireland in 1968, 69" (163). Terence Brown has described Mahon as "perhaps most in exile when actually at home" (18). Asking him about how he felt after graduating from Trinity College and roaming about in Europe and the United States, he replied: "I thought of myself as a surly stranger in a donkey jacket, with literary pretensions" (161). Feeling homeless, not only when in Ireland, but in any place in the world, seems to be a pervading emotion that Mahon could not evade. This feeling of being cut-off from humanity prevails in Mahon's poetry and testifies to his all-encompassing exile. However, despite the far-reaching motifs of disconnection and detachment, some of his poems attest to hidden attempts at finding a place where he calls home.

PARADOXES OF EXILE AND HOMECOMING IN SELECTED POEMS BY MAHON

Like his predecessors, Auden, Beckett, Joyce, and MacNeice, Derek Mahon has led a life of estrangement and exile. His displacement was a choice he made; nevertheless, the fact that he returned by 1996 to his flat in Dublin testifies to an inner conflict that Mahon has not succeeded in disguising through his poetry. The issue of whether to belong or to 'un-belong' to a specific people, place, or even a vocation was one of the main sources of Mahon's ontological and metaphysical unease. In most of the poems, his personae are epithets of duality, conflict, and opposition. In other poems, Mahon decides to belong to abstractions (like his diction, for instance) than to any concrete matter be it his country or his own self.

In one early poem, 'Rage for Order', the title of which is borrowed from Wallace Stevens' 'The idea of Order at Key West', Mahon adopts a despairing view of the poetic vocation. The speaker, probably a spokesman for the political unrest of Northern Ireland, fails to see the power of poetry in changing history or even causing a slight amendment to any of its workings. The speaker describes his vocation as "a dying art" (CP 47) and repeats the same description in line 21. The whole poem is a symbol of darkness, despair, and hopelessness specifically with regards to the description of the poet himself, his feelings, and his relationship to his people:

He is far from his people,
and the fitful glare of his high window is as
nothing to our scattered glass.
His posture is grandiloquent and deprecating, like this,
his diet ashes,
his talk of justice and his mother
the rhetorical device
of an etiolated emperor – (CP 47)

The speaker is totally displaced from his society, a stranger in a world that should have been his refuge. Instead of being so passionate to write to his people to change the reality they live in, the speaker finds writing poetry a rather torturous commitment that he believes is totally unrequired and unappreciated. Kenneally suggests that for Mahon, "art comes into being – if it comes at all – by striking out towards a horizon or crystallizing on a margin" (280); it is this margin that this poem revolves around. Whenever Mahon begins writing about his country and his people, his exile surfaces and the persona indulges in a process of disconnectedness to get uprooted from these people and what they represent. He creates barriers between himself and his people; he is far away from them, he lives in a tall building where he only gets to see them through his "high window". However, in the final stanza of this poem, the speaker, whose rage for order made him question the utility of poetic endeavor in face of "death, and the wages of the poor" (CP 47), shifts the entire scruple of his piece of writing. "Now watch me as I make history. Watch as I tear down/To build up with a desperate love" (CP 47), this is how the speaker chooses to belong to those people he was unable to communicate with earlier and this is probably a signal of hope that poetry is not futile, after all. In his interview with Eamonn Grennan, Mahon echoed Auden by stating unswervingly that "[he] [doesn't] think poetry makes anything happen" (174). In his poem 'The Sea in Winter' published in the same year, Mahon explicates:

And all this time I have my doubts
About this verse-making. The shouts
Of souls in torment round the town
At closing time make as much sense
And carry as much significance
As these lines carefully set down.
All farts in a biscuit tin, in truth –
Faint cries, sententious or uncouth. (CP 112)

'The Sea of Winter' underscores Mahon's failure to reconcile the act of 'verse-making' with providing any utilitarian service to the community, hence, undermining the role of the poet who turns into an exile in his society. However, 'Rage for Order' does not showcase that these are Mahon's

real convictions towards his vocation for his speaker proclaims proudly that he will make history and he is requesting attention from the public. This poem, thus, reflects contradicting sensibilities in Mahon's inner self and stresses the paradoxical condition of his poetic milieu as early as his first published volume.

In his 'Courtyards at Dleft', a poem about the place and value of art, Mahon contrasts the utopia of the painting he describes with his brutal Belfast-like city of his previous poem 'Rage for Order'. In fact, this ekphrasis is a means of displacement for the poet as it distances him from reality and indulges him in a trajectory of engulfment and aloofness. The world of the 17th century painting by Pieter de Hooch focuses on the interplay between the perspectives of the outside with the inside. The poem begins with a vivid description of the painting where the speaker is totally distanced from the story of its characters and the depiction of its setting. Later, the poet tends to personalize the painting and the poem by imagining himself "as having lived as a boy in the house whose courtyard is depicted by de Hooch" (Tinley 107):

I lived there a boy and know the coal
Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon
Lambency informing the deal table,
The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.
I must be lying low in a room there,
A strange child with a taste for verse,
While my hard-nosed companions dream of fire
And sword upon parched veldt and fields of rain-swept
gorse.

(CP 96)

This interval between "artist and autobiographical self, between poet and people is allowed to narrow dramatically as the world of the Dutch painting becomes the world of the speaker's childhood" (Shields 77). The displaced Mahon is attempting to belong to any place even if the place is an imaginary one. It is true that he is apparently reluctant to belong to the Belfast of his childhood, but it is also a veritable truth that his reading of the painting is constructed around his paradoxical logic of inclusion/exclusion.

Another poem that underscores Mahon's perplexing, paradoxical feelings of un/belonging is 'Spring in Belfast'. This poem was originally entitled 'Belfast' solidifying his sense of rootedness to his hometown and highlighting the theme of homecoming. He, then, changed it to 'Spring Vacation' to dissociate himself from this city and deal with it as a tourist would, until he eventually called it 'Spring in Belfast' confirming his double identity, both as a tourist and a citizen. From the first stanza, the speaker establishes his place as a member of this society, as one with his people:

Walking among my own this windy morning
In a tide of sunlight between shower and shower,
I resume my old conspiracy with the wet
Stone and the unwieldy images of the squinting heart.
Once more, as before, I remember not to forget. (CP 15)

The trope of paradox is clearly stressed in this stanza: where we have many words that relate to the speaker's endeavour at connectedness, there are others that equally associate him with disconnectedness. The phrases 'my own', 'resume', 'old', 'once more' and 'remember' underscore the

poet's strenuous efforts at being part of this city and connecting with its people. To be part of his city, he needs to forget so as to move from his position of darkness (by remembering what he does not want to remember) to a position of enlightenment (if he manages to forget what he aspires to forget). According to Shields, "to belong to his people, he must forgo his reason. Remembering not to forget, he deals with them circumspectly" (70). The idea is further stressed for he associates himself with a 'tide of sunlight' and afflicts the rest of the inhabitants with darker aspects of the turbulent weather which betokens Mahon's restless ebbing and flowing away from and back to Belfast and dismantles any concretization of the concept of home (Burton 34-5). This dichotomy of reason/unreason, darkness/light, belonging/un-belonging is made more explicit in the next stanza:

There is a perverse pride in being on the side
Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.
We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill
At the top of every street, for there is,
Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible – (CP 15)

The speaker in the second stanza shifts from the first person singular 'I' to the first person plural 'we', perhaps to demonstrate his unity with the inhabitants of Belfast and to generate or rather regenerate bonds with them. This is also a realization of the poet's tendency to move from place to place not only geographically (part of him still symbolizes tourism not homecoming as previously highlighted) but also mentally and psychologically as far as his feelings towards his hometown are concerned. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker resorts to the first person singular again, ostensibly reversing the previous two stanzas:

One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
The things that happen in the kitchen houses
And echoing back streets of this desperate city
Should engage more than my casual interest,
Exact more interest than my casual pity. (CP 16)

This stanza, which outwardly mirrors the first one implies that the speaker could not find a solution but to live with a divided mind. This poem indicates that Mahon "can only accept his origins across an interval between leaving Belfast and coming back for a holiday" (Shields 71). This last image in the poem ("... streets of this desperate city/Should engage more than my casual interest./Exact more interest than my casual pity") would connect Mahon to his city but only metaphorically and imaginatively after his previous attempts at connectedness. The internal division in Mahon, both as a human and as the speaker, are clearly out into action in this specific part of the poem which ends in an illusory compromise. Whereas his reality rejects this unification, his imagination would affirm its very existence. There is a clear echo of this dichotomy in his poem "Brecht in Svedenborg" in these lines:

This could be home from home
If things were otherwise.
Twice daily the mails come
Up the sound in a ship.
I notice that the house
Has four doors for escape. (CP 18)

In this poem, Mahon adopts the persona of a different writer (Brecht in this case) to be able to express his feelings

freely. In his article 'Derek Mahon's Poetry of Community', Brian Burton writes that in some of Mahon's poems, he tends to merge details from other artists and synthesizes them with his own preoccupations (36). Although the act of writing for many people, as well as for Mahon himself to some extent, appears futile, "the guise of an adopted persona liberates the poet from the need to constantly foreground his own identity" (Burton 37). This strategy allows Mahon to write about Belfast tacitly and indirectly as a place he sees as both his home and his exile, and thus, intensifies his paradoxical representation of his hometown and his feelings towards it and its people.

In 'Afterlives', directed to ¹James Simmons, Mahon links his life in London to his Irish memories (or speculations?). In this poem, he tries to respond to all accusations that he should have been there during the Troubles, and thus, become more deeply connected to his place. The poem is divided into two parts corresponding to his divided mentality between London and Ireland respectively. In the first part, the city (London) is represented as noisy and chaotic depicting restlessness and continuous movement. Words like "roar", "light", "bright" as opposed to "dark flat", "dark places", and "dim forms" depict London as a site of both modernity and civilization on the one hand and philistinism and primitiveness on the other. This part is focused on describing his house in London, his 'dark flat' that he wakes in "to the soft roar of the world". The oxymoronic phrase "soft roar" expounds Mahon's paradoxical feelings towards London, notwithstanding his Irish identity. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'roar' as "full, deep, prolonged cry uttered by a lion or other large beast" or "a loud and deep sound uttered by a crowd, or the boisterous expression of pain or anger" ("Roar"). This phrase reflects the poet's reconsideration of a potential, if not unconscious, connection between his life in London "soft", and what was happening in Ireland at that time "roar". Within himself, Mahon is living with this past/present, belonging/non-belonging dichotomy which he carries to the second stanza. In the second stanza, he integrates elements of light, 'bright', 'reason' and 'hope' with the "guns ... [that] go off in a back street" (CP 57). It is impressive how Mahon links the conscious with the subconscious demonstrating his rigorous challenges at abandoning his Irish identity while failing utterly at doing this. Physically, he is living in London in total denial and carelessness of the "guns" and the war taking place in his country, but mentally and emotionally, he is deeply rooted, deeply involved in what he consistently and insistently struggles to evade.

The second part of the poem begins with the first person and the present tense: "I am going home by sea/For the first time in years". The nature imagery in this stanza embodied in the words "gull", "masthead", "moon", and "waves" is contrasted to the 'roar' in London suggesting a more rural affinity to Ireland in the mind of the poet. The second part of the second stanza describes the overall setting of the scene: the ship and how it 'trembles', 'turns', and 'shudders' symbolizing the poet's rather painful re-entry to his native place and his tempestuous, muddled feelings upon home coming. The last two stanzas are very dramatically

portrayed underlining the changes he saw in his city upon arrival after years of war:

And I step ashore in a fine rain
To a city so changed
By five years of war
I scarcely recognize
The places I grew up in,
The faces that try to explain. (CP 57)

Everything has changed in his city and he is not able to recognize the places where he grew up anymore or even connect with his fellow Irish. The detachment the poet creates between himself and his city and between himself and his people (faces) adds to his complex feelings a sense of guilt and a sense of hope. The only full rhyme in this stanza is found in 'rain' and 'explain' connecting the poet to his land (nature once again) and attempting to find a way out or an explanation as it were to what happened to his city, people, and to himself.

The poem ends with the arrival, "superimposed over a phantom image of the life he would have lived if he had never left" (Haughton 96):

Both the hills are still the same
Grey-blue above Belfast.
Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
And lived it bomb by bomb
I might have grown up at last
And learnt what is meant by home. (CP 57)

The poem's last word is the word 'home', it is the destination of the poem and the poet as well. However, the meaning is rather elusive and unclear. It is horrific that the speaker believes the only way he could have understood what the word 'home' means is by living it "bomb by bomb". The half rhyme between 'home' and 'bomb' affirms this conflict in the poet's mind and reminds him and us that his hometown is associated with tumult and maelstrom. Commenting on his sense of home, in an interview with Willie Kelly, Mahon compares himself to Seamus Heaney: "Seamus Heaney is very sure of his place: I've never been sure of mine" (2). In the same interview, he adds:

At times [I] felt guilt about abandoning – if that's the word – my home ground, unlike Seamus Heaney, who, of course, digs deeper and deeper into the home ground ... I have felt guilt. My feelings are very complex. My attitude to Ireland is not a straight forward one because of the peculiar position of the Northern Protestant ... Those who go away ... do think frequently of the North. I suppose one is conscious of having it easy by getting out and avoiding direct daily confrontation. (2)

Thus, Mahon's 'failed' attempts at letting go of his Ulster Belfast seem to be, as paradoxical as it is, deeply rooted even if he alludes to the opposite. As per his interviews and poetry, Mahon's thoughts are those of separation in order to reconjoin, or a proposal conceding some connection only to detach once more. His thoughts are reflected in the incessant shifts between 'I' and 'we' which allows for brief moments of association followed by dissociation and vice versa. The speaker/poet is a displaced individual who is frequently forced to confront a sense of disorientation due to his conflicting inner struggles.

In a similar context, in 'The Hudson Letter', Mahon refers to the homeless living in cardboard boxes and depicts himself as just another "undesirable resident alien" (CP 190) and an "amateur immigrant" (CP 190). Burton comments that this homelessness is "as much a question of metaphysical displacement and physical distance from native territory as it is of not having a roof over one's head" (43). Mahon equates his metaphorical exile and mental displacement with his geographical dislocation. He is distracted and disoriented having a blurred definition of what the word 'home' means. For him, he is totally far from his home.

Another poem carrying analogous feelings of guilt and haplessness is 'Leaves'. The poem is divided into four stanzas, each stanza being a pictorial image awakening all the readers' senses. The first one begins with an oxymoronic statement postulating that the 'prisoners' have decided 'willingly' to be prisoners and are at peace with such a 'forced' decision:

The prisoners of infinite choice
Have built their house
In a field below the wood
And are at peace. (CP 59)

Even though Mahon claims that they 'are at peace', this does not negate or refute the fact that they remain prisoners. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a prisoner as "a person who is kept in prison as punishment" ("Prisoner") and is also "someone who is under the control of someone else and not physically free" ("Prisoner"). The prisoners in this poem are different since they still enjoy "infinite choice" in building their houses amidst nature and they feel tranquil and peaceful.

The second picture Mahon draws is that of nature, especially autumn, the season that fits him perfectly being the paradoxical season of both regeneration and death, of hope and desperation. The 'dead leaves' move by the power of the wind to the river and the sound they make is compared to the birds who scratch at the windows or tick on the road. But why would the 'free' bird scratch at the window? Perhaps it asks 'willingly' for its own incarceration? The conceit is better resumed when the leaves (prisoners?) attempt to escape, to fly like the birds. The attempt per se is appreciated by the speaker since the leaves basically challenge forces of nature. As is clear, the image is quite paradoxical since the birds are always free and can fly at their pleasure while the leaves, despite their continuous movement, are under the control of the wind. If the poet stresses the impossibility of defying natural norms, then he must be insinuating that his 'choice' of not being able to take a stance in the Troubles is that of a 'prisoner'. How would a prisoner decide his own fate? How would a person in captivity (both physically and psychologically) maintain a clear stance towards the on-goings of his life? Apparently, Mahon's culpable feelings are so innate that he seems to be defending himself by claiming that his unreceptivity is totally out of his hands.

The same idea is reiterated in the third stanza where he tries to comfort himself stating that there is an "afterlife of dead leaves". The preposterousness of such a proposition is momentarily affirmed by the image of the stadium with "an infinite rustling and sighing". To rustle is "to act or move

with energy or speed" ("Rustle" *Merriam-Webster*) and to sigh is "to take a deep audible breath as in weariness or relief" ("Sigh" *Merriam-Webster*). This could be a reference to the conceit of the leaves which could also be reminiscent with ghosts that move and rustle with the force of the wind. Generally, rustling and sighing take place indefinitely and on a large scale (a stadium) suggesting feelings of restlessness and agitation. Mahon does not forgive himself for taking the role of an observer in what his country was/is going through.

The final stanza continues the non-ending chain of paradoxes as it both signifies despair and hope. The metaphor of the "lost futures" is in sheer harmony with "the lives we might have lived". This statement echoes his poem 'Leaves' when he maintained that if he would have remained in Ireland, he would have understood the meaning of home. The third if conditional reflects the impossibility of the situation and attests to Mahon's despondency and distress. The only promise he could find would be in heaven where he would search for any beam of light in the land of 'lost futures'. The dichotomy of non/belonging is always recommenced in Mahon's poetry telling of an unresolved dilemma in relation to his homeland.

In 'Homecoming', he restates his quandary claiming that the problem he has with his people is that they don't seem to positively develop themselves or their country. Mahon seems to be stuck between the comfort of Boston where he "has bath and shave, /clean shirt etc., /full of potatoes, rested ..." (CP 34). The Boston images of restfulness and peace of mind have been utterly metamorphosed into images of frustration introduced by the pivot 'yet' hinting at a total change of mood and tone. The six-hour flight that separates Mahon's present from his 'progressive' past also separates between him and the 'home' he had created for himself back in Boston. The title of the poem itself maintains that home is where he is going to, not where he had been. However, upon his arrival, he realizes that nothing changed in his country even though he hasn't been there for two whole years. His homecoming is attributed to images of "guns" and "sex" which disrupts his past restful state. The final part of the poem suggests the impossibility of change as far as the Irish are concerned. For Mahon, "skies change but not souls change". Although he seems to be positive of this fact, he did not hesitate to call the poem 'homecoming' because deep inside, he understands that this place is where he belongs despite his 'failed' attempts at overcoming this feeling of rootedness.

Dedicated to J.G. Farrell, Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' is one of the most significant poems within the contemporary canon of Irish poetry. The title of the poem is followed by a quotation from the Greek poet Seferis *Mythistorema*: "Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels" (CP 81). The line might denote a similarity between Mahon and the Greek poet on personal as well as on vocational grounds. Like Mahon, Seferis was writing at times of territorial struggles. Before analyzing the poem, it would be noteworthy to hint at the implication of the dedication to J.G. Farrell. Farrell is a novelist of Irish descent known for the *Empire Trilogy* which deals with the consequences, both political and human, of British Imperial

rule. He focused on the Irish in his novel *Troubles* which recounts the story of an Anglo-Irish house in Wexford, thus inspiring Mahon to write the poem in hand.

Whereas the quoted line from Seferis would furnish the poem with the general timelessness and placelessness required, attempting to interweave it with a cosmic human condition, the dedication to Farrell connects it instantly with the Anglo-Irish strife, particularizing the 'weak souls' in Seferis' quote. By meticulously interlacing a web of mutuality, linking the public to the private, Mahon attempts to speak for all victims of history, for the silent and the unknown, for victims of political or natural troubles who were not given any chance of representation. The poem is more of an acknowledgement that the lives of these people did not go astray and that their sacrifices will not go unobserved.

The poem is divided into six 10-line stanzas following no specific rhythmic patterns or rhyme scheme. In the first line of the first stanza, the poet presents a factual/affirmative statement telling the readers that there are many places where a "thought might grow" and begins to enlist these places. A 'thought' is "the intellectual product or the organized views and principles of a period, place, group, or individual" (*Merriam-Webster*). For a thought to grow, then, certain criteria should be met, most crucial of which is liberty and space. However, Mahon lists eight paradoxical contexts for a thought to grow highlighting the co-existence of desperation and hope which is the hallmark of this poem in specific and Mahon's poetry in general:

Even now there are places where a thought might grow –
Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
To a slow clock of condensation
An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter
Of wildflowers in the lift-shaft,
Indian compounds where the wind dances
And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
Lime crevices behind rippling rain barrels,
Dog corners for bone burials;
And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford. (CP 81)

The dichotomy of pessimism and hope pervades the entire stanza which is built on recurrent images denoting blindness and loss of vision both literally and metaphorically. However, there is always a positive dimension to every image of desolation. Besides, Mahon in these lines attempts to find analogies between the human world and inanimate objects in that they both share elements of alienation and displacement. Not only are humans trapped in this fallen world, but also the 'mines', the 'echo', the 'wildflowers' and the 'Indian compounds' are. All creatures are prone to suffer, yet a glimpse of hope remains.

The second stanza begins with a salient conceit of the mushrooms that crowd around a keyhole. The picture is very suffocating and so are the words on the page. The uncanny image of the mushrooms in the abandoned shed straining for light from the keyhole is Mahon's way of articulating the condition of the 'weak', 'forgotten' people he alludes to via Seferis' quote. These people, victims of a world that abjures their existence and denies them all plausible ways of redemption, are waiting silently and patiently "listening to the rooks

querulous in the high wood". They find no one to complain their worries to but they remain hopeful that perhaps one day someone will release them from their griefs. The keyhole, then, becomes a symbol of both despair and hope, being the only means of connecting to the outer world, on the one hand, and of vision and hearing amid the utter blindness and deafness the mushrooms are living in, on the other.

The third stanza sets a more particular time and space for these mushrooms; a shift from the cosmic to the more specific. The speaker here tells of how buoyant these people were since the "civil war days". They were waiting and listening (the only two actions they could possibly perform). He regenerates the image of the keyhole but this time by conjoining it with the images of the rain:

He never came back, and light since then
Is a keyhole rusting gently after rain. (CP 82)

The pictorial representation becomes totally overwhelming with the oxymoronic phrase 'rusting gently after rain' which again, raises possibilities of hope (rain) but also highlights the passage of time (they have been waiting here for long). Light has lost its original sense and has been hideously mutilated into a keyhole; the keyhole becomes the hypernym, if not a synonym for light. The line "And once a day, perhaps, they have heard something" (CP 82) draws the 'still' picture of the people gathering by the keyhole waiting for any sound, anything giving them hope that they, one day, will be saved.

Stanza four depicts a rather bleaker image than the previous ones and introduces the idea of death for the first time. The speaker claims the mushrooms could be categorized into two sets. Those who had hopes of salvation and rescue (who remained "nearest the door") and the rest (the greatest majority) who got used to the dimness, who lost hope in deliverance, "there is left only the posture". The co-existence of hope and desperation is also at play here reflecting a disturbed sense of self that knows not which group to join. The image pertains to a conceivable knot between the speaker and these forgotten people. The process of identification, however, is never complete due to the speaker's indecisiveness and lack of credulity.

The next stanza shifts again from the general to the particular by hinting at possible identities to these people. Paradoxical representations of specificities in both time and space, are intermingled with a general feeling of defeat mixed with plausible redemption. Those people have been living in the dark for a "half century now". Succorless, they forgot the being and essence of light. They, also, forgot what the people on the other side of the realm looked like, they have never been visited by any one for fifty years. The speaker identifies his forgotten as "magi, moonmen, powdery prisoners of the old regime". They have been suffering from "drought" and "insomnia" unnoticed and neglected by the rest of the world. Even though they seem to be living a life-in-death existence, "there is life yet in their feverish forms". Here, "the mushrooms are delicately transformed from threatening to meek figures, acting in good faith" (Collins 260). The historical moment is always in flux signaling shifts in our growth and understanding of the world we live in.

The final stanza appears to be a plea on part of the speaker on behalf of these people:

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak in their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.
Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,
'Let the god not abandon us
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
We too had our lives to live. (CP 83)

Those silent people are utterly in pain but they are not allowed to speak their worries; they are left to die in bestial oblivion only because this world does not seem to give them the right to feel or express their emotions. The speaker tries strenuously to talk for them, sympathizing and empathizing, screaming to the world to save them, asking God not to leave them, for the price they paid was magnanimous: their lives. If Mahon is speaking for his Irish Protestants, a gap still exists between him and them; he remains incapable of dissolving and integrating with his people. His alienation from them is clear in the division he creates between "us" (himself as a detached observer) and "them" (the mushrooms, his people). In his interview with Eamonn Grennan, Mahon confides: "One of the damnable things about it was that you couldn't take sides. You couldn't take sides. In a kind of way, I still can't. It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungier and Magharafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it. In Crave Bag, they'd call it "colonial aphasia" (...) I was not prepared for what happened" (165). The paradox of belonging/unbelonging and the deep complexity of being a rooted exile becomes evident in his interview, in this poem, as was the case with the previous poems discussed. Mahon's unresolved struggles would challenge his complete surrender to rootedness despite his various attempts at homecoming, geographically and psychologically. Perhaps it is this ontological agitation that makes him drawn to all exiles and castaways, to the neglected and the forgotten.

CONCLUSION

No matter how hard he tries, Derek Mahon seems to be challenging profound feelings of rootedness to his Irish origins. This paper is an attempt to highlight the paradoxical contexts of his poems to underscore Mahon's conflicting emotions towards his home country. Outwardly, the poet is an epithet of exile, who tries consistently to escape from home and what this home represents. However, deeper readings of his poems would challenge such a view as many examples demonstrate a rooted, but disturbed, relationship between the poet and his home. Whereas part of him favours belonging to a place he calls home, the other rejects such a feeling and firmly dissociates itself from it. Despite his various -unsuccessful- attempts at being an exile, Mahon's feelings towards his hometown would always create a sense of hope that one day, he and his hometown would be reunited, if not geographical, then mentally and ontologically.

ENDNOTES

1. James Simmons is an Irish poet connected with the Irish Troubles and who accused Mahon of abandoning his Northern Irish roots. In his interview with Willie Kelly, Mahon states that 'Afterlives' was written "as part of a reply to James Simmons who at one point was forever accusing [him] of abandoning the North, forever urging [him] to return to [his] roots" (2).

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