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‘Curable Romantics’: Alastair Reid and Derek Mahon

Fran Brearton

> Foreigners are, if you like, curable romantics. The illusion they retain, perhaps left over from their mysterious childhood epiphanies, is that there might somewhere be a place – and a self – instantly recognizable, into which they will be able to sink with a single, timeless, contented sigh. In the curious region between that illusion and the faint terror of being utterly nowhere and anonymous, foreigners live. From there, if they are lucky, they smuggle back occasional undaunted notes, like messages in a bottle, or glimmers from the other side of the mirror.
>
> *Alastair Reid*[1]

I ‘Elsewhere the olive grove . . .’

Alastair Reid was born in 1926, son of a Church of Scotland minister in Galloway. His first years were spent in the village of Whithorn, a place he describes as ‘isolated, seldom visited, closer across the Irish Sea to Northern Ireland than it seems to the rest of Scotland’. In his autobiographical writings, he talks of an idyllic country childhood there, with summers spent on Arran. His ‘time chart’, he says, ‘divides cataclysmically into two parts, two contradictory modes of being. The first part, brief but everlasting, embraces the rural permanence I was born into in Scotland, articulated by the seasons, with the easy expectation that harvest followed harvest, that years repeated themselves with minor variations . . . a time when I was wholly unaware of an outside world’. Leaving that childhood village was, for Reid, the ‘first loss’, leaving behind forever ‘the certainty of belonging’, a ‘movement from a once-glimpsed wholeness towards a splintering of time’. The ‘second part’ of his life, he writes, ‘erupted with the Second World War [in which he served in the Royal Navy], which obliterated the predictability of anything and severed all

[1] Alastair Reid, ‘Notes on Being a Foreigner’, *Passwords: Places, Poems, Preoccupations* (London, 1964), 16.

flow, all continuity.'[2] Reid left Scotland in the late 1940s, and has since lived variously in France, Spain, Mallorca, the United States, South America and even (briefly) on a houseboat in England, always returning at intervals to Scotland, but living what has been an essentially itinerant life for the last six decades. His existence post-World War Two he describes as 'a long series of transitions', inhabiting not that lost Edenic childhood garden but a series of 'temporary gardens' instead.[3]

There are some suggestive parallels here with Louis MacNeice, born in Belfast twenty years earlier, in 1907. MacNeice's father was a Church of Ireland rector (later bishop); like Reid, MacNeice experienced a childhood loss which compromised any future sense of 'belonging'. For MacNeice, that loss originated in the death of his mother, when, as he said in 'Autobiography', 'the black dreams came'. The associated grief was also for the symbolic loss of a west of Ireland heritage and origin, as in 'Carrick Revisited' with its 'pre-natal mountain. . . far away'.[4] Childhood experience may partly explain in both poets what Reid describes as his adult immersion in an 'absorbing present' as 'all there was', or what Derek Mahon sees in MacNeice as a latching on to 'the existential tingle of the passing minute'.[5] Yet for both, too, writing may be partly about trying to capture a lost Eden – the childhood that is always, as Reid puts it, 'by definition a never-never land. . . before we realised what time was'[6] – even if always with the simultaneous recognition it cannot be done. In the Irish tradition, MacNeice stands at a remove from John Hewitt's well-known dictum that the writer must be a 'rooted man', but he remains bound by and to his past: as he wrote in 'Western Landscape', he is 'neither Brandan / Free of all roots nor yet a rooted peasant.'[7] Reid similarly locates himself as neither anchored nor free-floating in relation to Scotland: 'Disclaiming my roots, I elected instead not rootlessness, since that implies a lack, a degree of unanchored attention, but a deliberate, chosen strangeness.'[8] This is the 'condition' he describes from which I have taken my title in the epigraph quoted above:

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[2] Alastair Reid, 'Hauntings', *Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner* (Edinburgh, 1987), 71, 74, 82–3, 87–8.

[3] Ibid., 89–90.

[4] Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, Peter McDonald (ed.) (London, 2007), 200, 262.

[5] Reid, 'Digging up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 31. Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970–1995*, Terence Brown (ed.) (Oldcastle, 1996), 27.

[6] Reid, 'The Transformations: Notes on Childhood', *Passwords*, 229.

[7] MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 267.

[8] Reid, 'Digging up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 31.

that of being a permanent 'outsider', of manoeuvring uneasily between the 'illusion' of belonging, of nostalgia for that 'once-glimpsed wholeness' and the 'faint terror of being utterly nowhere'.

For Reid, poems – those 'occasional undaunted notes', the 'messages in a bottle' from the traveller at sea – emerge out of that tension between romantic illusion and existential fear. It is a tension implied in the autobiographical title poem 'To Lighten My House' from Reid's first collection in 1953:

> My father's grave voice preaching, in a parish rich with fishermen,
> The chanted parables for faith, while a dark god
> stormed in the unworded nights and wild eyes
> of the boy I was,
>
> the hard-bitten heather on hills, the drowned bird nursed like a sister
> wearing death in its sweet breast, all spelled my fear
> on the frightened nightfalling sea where I sailed,
> growing up and growing old –
>
> years where my head, turned loose in burning chapels of doubt,
> turned back on my blood, with all the words for journeys –
> war, and a war in my body to break
> that one way back. . .[9]

This is a poem which on one level records the separation of the poet from his origins ('I set this christened poem loose / to lighten my house'). He wakes, at the poem's close, 'in / the nowhere of the moment, single-willed / to love the world'. And yet its emotional pitch at times also makes this something of a paean to a far away 'aging' Scotland, a first-loved territory, a romanticised landscape. Reid's 'dark god', like MacNeice's 'black dreams', suggests the disturbing subconscious depths which may yet be the source of inspiration, as much as they epitomise fear and loss.

MacNeice's complicated relation to his home ground, it has become a critical commonplace to note, is something which adversely affected his reputation earlier in the century. At one time – before his 'reclamation' by a later generation of poets including Derek Mahon and Michael Longley – MacNeice appeared to be in danger of disappearing between English and Irish traditions,

[9] Alastair Reid, *To Lighten My House* (New York, 1953), 52–3.

central to neither. One might also speculate that Reid's itinerant life, and his one-time disavowal of the tag a 'Scottish writer' have not always helped his critical reputation in a climate where the tendency is to think of literature along 'national' lines. And unlike MacNeice, recovered by and for an 'Irish' tradition, Reid lacks the influence that would in a sense rehabilitate him in a similar way for the contemporary critical scene. To note his affinities with a poet such as MacNeice (or with Edwin Muir) is not to make claims for Reid that are excessive: he is, relatively speaking, a minor poet in his own right.[10] His poetic output between 1953 and 1978, when he published in *Weathering* those poems which seemed to him to 'deserve a continuing existence', is fairly slender; and he prefaced the book with the comment that it was 'something of a farewell on my part to formal poetry'.[11] Most of Reid's subsequent work has been as an outstanding translator of writers such as Borges and, most recently, Neruda, or as a prose writer.

Yet given the affinity between MacNeice and Reid, it is not surprising that echoes of Reid seem to surface in Mahon, for whom MacNeice was, famously, the 'familiar voice' whispering in his ear. MacNeice must always be, for Mahon, the more obvious point of comparison. But as I have suggested above, perhaps part of that MacNeicean inheritance is a more generic 'condition' which Reid, from a Scottish background that bears comparison with MacNeice's Irish experience, exemplifies too. The motifs of 'To Lighten My House', for instance, with its seemingly pagan 'dark god' as a source of poetry disturbing a Christian surface, may be found in Mahon's own quasi-autobiographical take on his childhood in 'Courtyards in Delft' as the boy 'lying low in a room there, / A strange child with a taste for verse' and his invocation to the 'Maenads' to bring 'fire and sword'.[12] Whether affinity can be attributable to direct influence in the case of Mahon and Reid is a moot point of course, as is also the situation with Reid and MacNeice earlier, and whether Mahon (born in 1941) was and is familiar with Reid's 1950s and 1960s collections is

[10] That said, Reid, who writes clean, deceptively simple lyrics, and is formally adept, may suffer in the current critical climate anyway, in which one tendency is to advocate a more modernist or neo-modernist aesthetic. Christopher Whyte, for instance, notes of Edwin Muir that 'His earlier work sets off unabashedly from the diction and ideology of the English Romantics' and that 'Where prosody is concerned, he wrote during much of his life as if Eliot, Pound and the Modernist generation had not existed'. Whether this is necessarily a bad thing may be more a matter of opinion than Whyte implies; indeed, from another point of view, this may be Muir's singular virtue. See Christopher Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2004), 75.

[11] Alastair Reid, *Weathering: Poems and Translations* (New York, 1978), n.p.

[12] Derek Mahon, *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford, 1982), 2.

not known. But Mahon spent a substantial part of the 1960s in Canada and the United States, and it seems unlikely he would not have seen Reid's contributions to the *New Yorker* (of which Reid was on the staff for many years) as well as to the *Listener* or *Encounter*. In a sense, Mahon and Reid moved in similar freelance journalistic worlds through the 1960s and 1970s (and Reid was far better known in the United States at that time than in the United Kingdom or Ireland).

Those speculations aside, they also share a direct poetic forebear in Robert Graves. Reid worked closely with Graves through the late 1950s, at one time his most intimate literary friend (even, apparently, ironing Graves' shirts for him on his American tours of this period – all of which were organised by Reid). The relationship ended abruptly in 1961 when Reid ran off with Robert Graves' second muse, Margot Callas, but the influence remained. For Mahon, Robert Graves was one of the poets he absorbed during his undergraduate years at Trinity between 1960 and 1963. It is notable, too, given Mahon's own fraught relation with 'home' (of which more anon) that the edition of Graves' poems so influential on Mahon was that from 1959, in which Graves pointed out that his poems were written, variously, in England, Wales, France, Egypt, Switzerland, the United States and Spain, but that they 'remain true to the Anglo-Irish poetic tradition into which I was born'.[13] In Mahon's work, Graves's influence meets Yeatsian rhetoric in a way we never see in Reid and so he does walk, stylistically, on the slightly wilder side than the Scottish poet. Yet one might feasibly suggest that both are drawn to similar things in Graves: his abandonment of 'home' in the famous *Goodbye to All That* of 1929; his peripatetic lifestyle (although he did ultimately settle in Mallorca); the sense of a break with the stabilities of the past – in Graves' case, as for many other veterans, brought about by the experience of the First World War. And if Graves was a poet for whom the past, in a way, becomes a foreign country, he also turned his back on a fairly rigid and repressive Protestant family tradition. 'We learned', he said in *Goodbye to All That*, 'to be strong moralists and spent a good deal of our time on self-examination and good resolutions. . .I had great religious fervour which persisted until shortly after my confirmation at the age of sixteen.'[14] Having finally 'discarded Protestantism' in his youth,[15] Graves later embraced, in the

[13] Robert Graves, *Collected Poems* (London, 1959). It is the only time he makes such a claim.

[14] Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1st edition; London, 1929), 28–9.

[15] Ibid., 32.

1940s, an alternative mythology of the 'white goddess' which, whatever else it may be, is self-serving for the male poet's creativity in a way his childhood religion could never be.

That said, from another perspective, Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* also looks rather like a perpetual return to all that. (Graves followed his 1929 autobiography with a play in 1930 entitled *But It Still Goes On*.) *The White Goddess* sustains a quarrel with western Christianity redolent of a never entirely to be suppressed anxiety; Graves' 'elsewhere'—the 'Majorcan mountain village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle'[16]—is a counterpoint to, and therefore always in relation with, his place of origin. Something similar may be said of his poetic 'successors'. For Reid, after his experience of World War II (like Graves in relation to England after World War I), his homeland proved too claustrophobic for him to stay there. 'I felt', he writes, 'firmly severed from it. . . Put together a sniff of disapproval, a wringing of hands, a shaking of the head that clearly expects the worst, and you have some idea of how dire Scotland can be. All the other countries I have lived in have seemed comparatively joyful.'[17] Distanced by his education (grammar school and later Trinity College, Dublin) from his family background, Mahon, after passing his finals, also distanced himself literally from Ireland, embracing in the mid-1960s financial instability and an itinerant life; 'I fled to Canada', he says, 'where they couldn't find me. Truth to tell, I hardly did a hand's turn in four years'.[18] Or, as he puts that yearning for 'elsewhere' as opposed to Northern Ireland in the later 'North Wind: Portrush':

> Elsewhere the olive grove,
> *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe,*
> Poppies and parasols,
> Blue skies and mythic love.
> Here only the stricken souls
> No spring can unperturb.[19]

[16] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (3rd edition; London, 1961), 14.
[17] Reid, 'Hauntings', *Whereabouts*, 72.
[18] Mahon, 'A Ghostly Rumble among the Drums' in Brown (ed.), *Journalism*, 221.
[19] Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 5.

II A Dark Country

Yet in spite of joyous escape the 'yardstick' (for the measuring of good or ill) in Mahon's as in Reid's writings remains the primal landscape of youth, the country of origin. Reid has more recently acknowledged that, however much he might be the 'shifting opposite' of the 'rooted' man, Scotland 'exists spinally. . . as a kind of yardstick against which I measure myself through time'.[20] Mahon has always more overtly brooded on his roots, and the impossibility of severing those roots entirely. His 'Elsewhere the olive grove' is thus conditioned by the poem's opening premise: 'I shall never forget the wind / On this benighted coast'. As Edna Longley observes, those 'Mediterranean longings' in Mahon are not separable from his association of wind, rain and sea with the 'agony of lost spirits', and with his own Ulster Protestant origins.[21]

To probe further the affinities between Reid and Mahon – sometimes so noticeable in phrasal echoes as to be almost uncanny – one might look first of all to the weather. 'In the beginning was the Irish rain' wrote Louis MacNeice in his autobiographical fragment 'Landscapes of Childhood and Youth', with a meteorological and biblical convergence appropriate not merely to his own experience of Ulster, but to the respective experiences of Reid and Mahon as well.[22] George Bernard Shaw famously said in 1906 that 'There is no Irish race any more than there is an English race or a Yankee race. There *is* an Irish climate, which will stamp an immigrant more deeply and durably in two years, apparently, than the English climate will in two hundred.'[23] This is not to go down a road of meteorological as against racial essentialism, merely to note that those who describe Mahon as more a meteorological than geographical poet correctly identify a preoccupation that he and Reid unquestionably share.[24] For Reid, indeed, he says, echoing MacNeice's association of 'the Word' with 'the Irish rain' that 'The beginning of poetry for me was the dazzling realisation of all that seemed to be magically compressed into the word "weather"'.[25] Wind,

[20] Reid, 'Digging Up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 20–1.

[21] Edna Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art' in Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross, 1995), 291.

[22] Louis MacNeice, 'Appendix A' in E. R. Dodds (ed.), *The Strings are False* (London, 1965), 216.

[23] George Bernard Shaw. 'Preface for Politicians' (1906) in *John Bull's Other Island* (London, 1984), 11.

[24] Eamonn Hughes notes this characteristic of Mahon's work in '"Weird / Haecceity": Place in Derek Mahon's Poetry' in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross, 2002), 99.

[25] Reid, 'Notes on Being a Foreigner', *Passwords*, 8.

rain, sea: there we have the dominant motifs at work in both poets, an elemental flux sometimes set in opposition to their respective communities of origin, sometimes, in stormy weather, embodying the imminent apocalypse. The symbolic play of light and dark, flux and permanence characteristic of their poetry (as also that of MacNeice) finds climatic – sometimes climactic – embodiment in the seasonal extremities of their first landscapes. As Reid writes:

> The Scottish landscape – misty, muted, in constant flux and shift – intrudes its presence in the form of endlessly changing weather; the Scottish character, eroded by a bitter history and a stony morality, and perhaps in reaction to the changing turbulence of weather, subscribes to illusions of permanence, of durability, asking for a kind of submission, an obedience. I felt, from the beginning, exhilarated by the first, fettered by the second. Tramps used to stop at our house, men of the road, begging a cup of tea or an old shirt, and in my mind I was always ready to leave with them, because between Scotland and myself I saw trouble ahead.[26]

The 'trouble ahead' – Reid's frustration with the Calvinist culture of his homeland – is played out partly through meteorological motifs in his best-known and most frequently anthologised poem 'Scotland':

> It was a day peculiar to this piece of the planet,
> when larks rose on long thin strings of singing
> and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels.
> Greenness entered the body. The grasses
> shivered with presences, and sunlight
> stayed like a halo on hair and heather and hills.
> Walking into town, I saw, in a radiant raincoat,
> the woman from the fish-shop. 'What a day it is!'
> cried I, like a sunstruck madman.
> And what did she have to say for it?
> Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves
> as she spoke with their ancient misery:
> 'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!'[27]

[26] Reid, 'Digging Up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 21 – 2.
[27] Reid, *Weathering*, 39.

The poem sets light and movement – larks rising, the air shifting, the grass shivering – and the poet as 'sunstruck madman' against the rigidity of a culture that for Reid always expects the worse and cannot celebrate the changing present moment. Its alliterative qualities, and its celestial imagery come up against the harsh consonantal final line, whose deadly repetitions are symbolic of a trapped culture, one in which even the living are coffined and confined in the graveyard of the past. The poem is set in St Andrews (where Reid was both a student in the 1940s and briefly resident in the 1970s), a place which, he says, 'In its human dimension. . . embodied the Scotland I chose to leave behind me. The spirit of Calvin, far from dead, stalked the countryside, ever present in a pinched wariness, a wringing of the hands.'[28] It explains, in effect, why Reid disclaimed his roots and sought to free himself from an oppressive heredity – those raging ancestors.[29]

Throughout the 2007 StAnza poetry festival, 'Scotland' was projected onto the walls of the town at night, and Reid read the poem – not through choice, and avowedly for the last time – at the close of the 100 Poets' Gathering. Having done so, he set fire to his copy of the poem with the observation 'We're free of it, we're free of it, we're free of it!'. Whether that attitude was premature in relation to Scotland's Calvinist culture is open to question. But the poem had undoubtedly become, for Reid, its own kind of 'ball and chain', tethering him, for readers, to an 'old Scotland' the poem itself critiques.[30] There is a certain irony to that position replicated in the writing and reception of Mahon's 'Ecclesiastes', a poem equally savage in its indictment of 'ancient misery'.

> God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-
> chosen purist little puritan that,
> for all your wile and smiles, you are (the
> dank churches, the empty streets,
> the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and
> shelter your cold heart from the heat

[28] Reid, 'Digging Up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 23.

[29] There is scope for comparison, too, in poems about particular male family figures who subvert those oppressive Protestant 'fathers': Reid's 'Grandfather', for instance (*To Lighten My House*, 18), with his 'windy tales from the spells of his sailing life' and his 'deep down laughter' resonates with the 'Wicked avuncular fantasy' of Mahon's 'My Wicked Uncle' (*Night-Crossing*, 8).

[30] See http: / / blogs.guardian.co.uk / books / 2007 / 04 / brian_johnstone_setting_scotla. html [accessed 01 March 08].

of the world. From woman-inquisition, from the
bright eyes of children. Yes you could
wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal
with locusts and wild honey, and not
feel called upon to understand and forgive
but only to speak with a bleak
afflatus, and love the January rains when they
darken the dark doors and sink hard
into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped
graves of your fathers. . .[31]

'Ecclesiastes' plays the same motifs of light against dark, fixity against fluidity. The poem's syntactical structure, its running away with itself, is both a parody of evangelism, but also a symbol of the word unfettered: this poem is definitely not the 'tied-up swing'. As with 'Scotland', it is therefore both a product, and disavowal, of the Protestant community of the poet's origins. Both poems, written 'at one remove' to borrow Mahon's phrase, from a particular Protestant sensibility nevertheless understand that sensibility from within. Ancestors it seems, raging or otherwise, cannot be easily discarded.

Fundamentalist religion and a windy coastline: these are Irish-Scottish points of comparison that do not need to be laboured perhaps, and yet in terms of modern Irish poetry, the comparison is rarely made. Rather, the tendency is, in the case of Mahon, to relate his seaboard imagination either back to MacNeice, or across the water in the other direction to Robert Lowell and New England. These are valid comparisons, certainly, and in the case of MacNeice the affinity with a later generation of Irish poets is a tangible instance of acknowledged influence at work. Nevertheless, such comparisons tend to overlook what is also an immediate and obvious parallel with Scottish poetry. As Edna Longley notes, the Mahon protagonist often emerges from a tension between 'willed order and extreme unconscious chaos' in 'an environment where all imposed structures – suburban, urban, industrial, Protestant, human, cerebral, artistic – leave something out'. Against those imposed structures, and throughout Mahon's work, the 'sea-wind' and the rain are unpredictable elements evocative of that 'unconscious chaos', the potential embodiment of 'cosmic apocalypse'.[32] Like Reid, Mahon is both 'exhilarated' and 'fettered'. 'Character', 'history', 'morality' – these are Reid's own forms of 'willed order'

[31] Derek Mahon, *Lives* (Oxford, 1972), 3.

[32] See Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', 291.

set in opposition to the 'endlessly changing weather', the shifting landscape. The wind (more benign, less gale-force) blows through Reid's first collection, *To Lighten My House*, too. We are never, as he suggests in 'Directions for a Map', 'safe from weather and the ways of love', disruptive and unpredictable elements that cannot be quantified or fixed in space and time, that are never subject to an act of will.[33]

That tension between order and chaos is central to Mahon's aesthetic, and its source in his experience of growing up in Protestant suburban Northern Ireland may be seen in 'A Refusal to Mourn':

> But the doorbell seldom rang
> After the milkman went,
> And if a coat-hanger
> Knocked in an open wardrobe
> That was a great event
> To be pondered on for hours
>
> While the wind thrashed about
> In the back garden, raking
> The roof of the hen-house,
> And swept clouds and gulls
> Eastwards over the lough
> With its flap of tiny sails. . .[34]

For Seamus Heaney, the first two lines quoted above evoke a condition of 'unfulfilled expectancy' that he identifies as characteristic of a younger generation in Belfast during the late 1950s and early 1960s—an expectancy met in part by the massive cultural and political changes towards the end of the 1960s.[35] The poem also evokes the static and fettered condition of Northern Ireland before the eruption of the troubles, with its air of silent desperation, and yet its sense, in the violently thrashing wind, of imminent change.

That static society—at its most extreme on a Sunday—is familiar to poets such as MacNeice (as in 'Sunday Morning') or to the American poets Lowell and Wallace Stevens; it also strikes chords with Reid from a Scottish perspective:

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[33] Reid, *To Lighten My House*, 48.

[34] Derek Mahon, *The Snow Party* (Oxford, 1975), 32.

[35] Seamus Heaney, 'Belfast', *Preoccupations* (London, 1984), 28.

> Sunday in Scotland is the Sabbath, a day you might easily mistake for Doomsday if you were not used to it, a day that barely struggles into wakefulness. . . Houses are silent as safes, and silence as safe as houses; bottles are not only stoppered but locked; and, in the appropriate season, you can hear a leaf thud to the ground. Ecclesiastical ghosts stalk the countryside; the weather is the only noticeable happening.[36]

Given the different (political and historical) context, Reid's silent (Sunday) desperation is without the apocalyptic sensibility characteristic of Mahon. Yet his landscapes too can be an ominous indictment of the static, fettered human societies of 'willed order'. In the early poem 'The Village' his childhood environment is 'thick with silence' in which 'No one moves' and 'The village hangs / With more intensity than a heavy dream'. Yet (and in a manner pre-emptive of Mahon's later 'In Belfast', with its 'We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill / At the top of every street, for there it is – / Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible. . . '[37]) the brooding landscape which surrounds the village can become judge and jury, curse or redemption, a mindscape that might one day engender change:

> But turn and you will find the mountains watching
> almost in judgement, like stone sentinels
> over your shoulder, critical as eyes
> behind the screen of distance, keeping watch.
> Nor in midsummer ever be deceived
> by silence, or by villages at peace.
> Behind your house, those hollow hills are hearing
> your quietest thoughts, as loud as thunder.[38]

III Renegades and the Unreconciled

As Edna Longley writes, Mahon's poetry is 'torn between a view of the human condition as "terminal" and a view of the human imagination as sheltering some "residual" spark'.[39] In that zone Reid talks of between the illusion of a

[36] Reid, 'The Seventh Day', *Passwords*, 220–1.
[37] Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, 6.
[38] Reid, *To Lighten My House*, 19.
[39] Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', 280.

stable place and self, and the 'faint terror of being utterly nowhere', Mahon tends, in a Beckettian sense, to be closer to the latter, with his 'unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain' who 'Strangle on lamp-posts in the dawn rain'.[40] The country of his imagination is darker than Reid's, even though some of the same tensions underpin the work of both poets. Yet both, as I have suggested, still hanker after that illusion of a prelapsarian world, projecting it onto landscapes perfected in memory yet always compromised by the present moment. The contradictory impulses so often documented in Mahon – the desire to be 'Through with history', or to be released *into* history; to say that 'Places as such are dead' or that we are 'in one place only'; the pull between 'here' and 'elsewhere', between innocence and experience[41] – are symbolised in what are for Mahon, as also for Reid, the potentially transcendental, potentially burdensome images of sea and sky.

In Reid's 'Four Figures for the Sea', the 'foreshore cluttered / black with the tide's untidy wrack', and the night that 'wore guilt like a watermark' are familiar from Mahon's 'As God is my Judge', where the tide rebukes the Titanic's Bruce Ismay, leaving 'broken toys and hatboxes / Silently at my door'.[42] Yet the epiphanic light of the close of Reid's 'Four Figures' – 'singly I walked into singing light. . . Beyond / I faced the innocent sea' – is also familiar from Mahon's 'dream of limestone in sea-light' of 'Recalling Aran': 'Conceived beyond such innocence, / I clutch the memory still, and I / Have measured everything with it since'.[43] For Reid, the Isle of Arran, in the poem of that title, works similarly as a place 'where my world was stilled', where 'A mountain dreamed in the light of the dark. . . all thought a prisoner of the still sense'.[44] And yet the memory clutched 'still' cannot stop release into time – Mahon's 'Four thousand miles away' perspective; Reid's 'butterfly' which 'drunkenly began the world'. Aran and Arran may be versions of what Reid calls the 'never-never land' of childhood, where time does not exist; but as both poems suggest, that 'never-never land' is also an irrecoverable space, whose imaginative evocation serves only to measure how far from it we have drifted or fallen.

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[40] Mahon, 'Glengormley', *Night-Crossing*, 5.

[41] See Mahon, 'The Last of the Fire Kings' and 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' in *The Snow Party* (Oxford, 1975), 9, 36; 'Brighton Beach', and 'A Garage in Co. Cork' in *The Hunt by Night*, 27, 46.

[42] Reid, *To Lighten My House*, 38; Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, 31.

[43] Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, 28. Compare also Michael Longley, 'Leaving Inishmore' in *No Continuing City* (London, 1969), 52.

[44] Reid, *To Lighten My House*, 51.

Significantly, both poets evoke those landscapes from the perspective of America, as if the literal distance also provides an emotional distance from a repressive home ground of day-to-day existence. For Reid, his arrival in the United States in 1949 'felt like immediate liberation. I could sense the wariness in me melt, the native caution dwindle'.[45] For Mahon, his own Canadian and American wanderings in the 1960s suggest a similar experience: that it is the view from America which permits the transcendental vision of 'Recalling Aran' as against the savage critique of 'Ecclesiastes'. America, we might say, releases something of the (curable) romantic in both, where proximity to the supposedly 'romantic' home ground cannot. Distance sustains a necessary aesthetic tension between 'illusion' and 'terror'. And it may be for this reason that both have been, if to differing degrees, so invested in the idea of being the stranger, the visitor, the tourist, and yet fight shy of the (weighted) label 'exile'.

As Mahon observes, '[t]he notion of exile has for centuries permeated the Irish consciousness'. Yet, he goes on to argue, 'while it was true of writers like Joyce and Beckett in the recent past, it is hardly true in the same sense for young poets like Michael O'Loughlin and Harry Clifton, who spend most of their lives outside Ireland'–a situation true of Mahon himself in the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of exile, reliant as it is on a strong sense of 'home', is for Mahon no longer applicable because poets are 'tied less to particular places–or parishes–than ever before', instead part of a 'global community' of writers.[46] Reid broods on the idea in more detail: 'Exiles', he suggests, 'as opposed to expatriates, either wither away, or else flourish from being transplanted, depending on whether they keep alive any hope of returning to what they left, or abandon it completely as forever inaccessible. The hope of returning to the past, even at its faintest, makes for a vague unease, a dissatisfaction with the present.' Instead, Reid opts for the description 'foreigner'–never belonging, but immersed fully in the present moment of where he is. The 'tourist' is different from the 'foreigner' because 'tourists have a home to go to and a date of departure'.[47] Mahon destabilises this further when he writes of MacNeice: '"A tourist in his own country," it has

[45] Reid, 'Hauntings', *Whereabouts*, 72–3.

[46] Derek Mahon, 'Introduction' in Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London, 1990), xx. His argument here is inflected by the case he makes–contradicting an earlier position in which he argued for the distinctiveness of Northern writing–that 'Northern Irish' poetry is part of a 'national' and 'global' body of work.

[47] Reid, 'Notes on Being a Foreigner', *Passwords*, 5–6.

been said, with the implication that this is somehow discreditable; but of what sensitive person is the same not true? The phrase might stand, indeed, as an epitaph for modern man, beside Camus' "He made love and read the newspapers."' [48] In effect, Mahon takes that surety of a return home away, embracing instead the condition of perpetual stranger. Brooding on 'home', Mahon argues, is habitual in modern Irish poetry not because of either an exilic or stay-at-home certainty as to place, but rather because of 'an uncertainty . . . as to where [home] actually is'.[49]

That uncertainty leaves both in what Reid identifies as the 'curious region' between prelapsarian innocence and metaphysical despair – Mahon tempted more towards metaphysical despair. (Mahon talks of 'the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source'.)[50] As a result, both are habitually drawn to the figures of outsiders. Reid calls them 'renegades' – 'dissident prophets and critics' who 'threatened the unanimous surface of things' – attributing their proliferation to the repressive 'old Scotland' of his youth: 'Such a society', he writes, 'must inevitably generate renegades, and Scotland has always done so, in droves – those renegades who turn up all over the world'.[51] The dissenters, the escapees, the itinerant artists: those 'renegades' are also there in a different form in Mahon's 'lost tribe' of outsiders and tormented artists, the 'unreconciled' figures of Nerval, De Quincey, Van Gogh, Dowson, with whom he identifies in his early work.

For all the formal coherence and balance evident in their early work, both poets recognise, in the end, that the stable, unified self, however seductive it may be as a concept, is also a myth. There are, one might say, renegade selves in these poems too. Some observations from Reid's essay 'Notes on Being a Foreigner' strike obvious chords here with MacNeice as well as Mahon, Reid's phrases are familiar to readers of early Mahon because the attitudes are shared: 'Belonging. I am not sure what it means, for I think I always resisted it . . . To alight in a country without knowing a word of the language is a worthwhile lesson . . . One is forced back to a watchful silence . . . If voices are anything to go by, then the idea of having a fixed, firm self is wildly illusory'.[52] Every public self, as Reid is aware, is a kind of fiction or performance; that an

[48] Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England' in Brown (ed.), *Journalism*, 25.

[49] Mahon, 'Introduction' in Fallon and Mahon (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, xxii.

[50] Derek Mahon, 'Introduction' in idem (ed.), *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (London, 1972), 12.

[51] Reid, 'Digging Up Scotland', *Whereabouts*, 27.

[52] 'Notes on Being a Foreigner', *Passwords*, 7, 9, 10.

essential and timeless 'version' underpins all the others is an illusion. As he puts it in 'Disguises':

> My selves, my presences,
> like uniforms and suits,
> some stiff, some soiled, some threadbare,
> and not all easy-fitting,
> hang somewhere in the house. . .[53]

This is a far cry from, say, Heaney's poetic sense of self: 'not all easy-fitting' suggests a condition of 'strangeness' that is echoed in Mahon's (and Michael Longley's) preoccupation with multiple 'lives'—the title of Mahon's second collection—through the early 1970s.

In 'The Last of the Fire Kings', Mahon echoes Reid's hankering after an itinerant 'strangeness'—the delight in the condition of being a 'foreigner', of multiple selves in disguise:

> I want to be
> Like the man who descends
> At two milk churns
>
> With a bulging
> String bag and vanishes
> Where the lane turns,
>
> Or the man
> Who drops at night
> From a moving train
>
> And strikes out over the fields
> Where fireflies glow
> Not knowing a word of the language.[54]

It is, Reid writes, 'the strangeness of a place' that 'propels one into life'.[55] Both Reid and Mahon—or early Mahon certainly—are on unpredictable journeys,

[53] Reid, *Passwords*, 137.
[54] Mahon, *The Snow Party*, 9.
[55] Reid, 'Notes on Being a Foreigner', *Passwords*, 8.

poets always in transit. The 'curious region' in which the 'curable romantic' exists is one of perpetual heading into the unknown. In Mahon's 'Girls in their Seasons', even the moment where he claims to remain 'intact' obliquely puns on 'ourselves' as multiple, therefore already divided.

> No earthly schedule can predict
> Accurately our several destinations.
> All we can do is wash and dress
> And keep ourselves intact.
> . . .
>
> Now all we have
>
> Is the flinty chink of Orion and the Plough
> And the incubators of a nearby farm
> To light us through to the land of never-never.
> Girls all, be with me now
> And keep me warm
> Before we go plunging into the dark forever.[56]

The 'land of never-never' or the 'dark forever': these are always, as Mahon knows, the two possibilities, the equivalent of Reid's illusion and terror. Mahon's journey is both into the past and into an unknown future. Certainty for both poets is the real illusion, not least because poems themselves are an unpredictable linguistic journey. In Reid's 'Directions for a Map', the one-dimensional and static map symbolises a kind of 'willed order'. On a map:

> There are no signs of love and trouble, only
> dots for a village and a cross for churches.
>
> Here space is free for once from time and weather.
> The sea has paused. To plot is possible.
> Given detachment and a careful angle,
> all destinations are predictable.

But this is, the poem shows, in the end an unsustainable fiction:

[56] Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, 1–2.

> Somewhere behind a blurring village window,
> a traveller waits. The storm walks in his room.
> Under his hand, a lamplit map is lying.
> Pencils tonight will never take him home.[57]

That the map is 'lying' tells us perhaps everything we need to know: that for Reid, as for Mahon, 'home' is forever out of reach.

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[57] Reid, *To Lighten My House*, 44, 48.