FAST ENOUGH: POEMS

AND

PLACES WHERE A THOUGHT MIGHT GROW:
CULTURE, LIMINALITY AND THE TROUBLES IN
DEREK MAHON’S LIVES (1972) AND THE SNOW
PARTY (1975)

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Abstract

*Fast Enough* is a collection of poems that plays on the potential implications of its title when thinking about history, time, place, nationality, religion and culture. These things are always in flux, there are no fixed systems, no solutions can be endorsed. There is a nagging anxiety and sense of being overwhelmed by these forces as the poems negotiate and come into contact with them. Formally the poems are interested in the possibility of the stanza, a controlled but arbitrary use of line and rhyme, the use of enjambment and variations in tone or delivery, from the colloquial to the intellectual. They use both urban and bucolic imagery, interspersing this to disorientate and confuse. The collection aims to unsettle, to propose and reject when thinking about the relationship of poetry to historical and contemporary pressures; the result is an unattached individualism. The poems offer a critique and inform. Distance and detachment are important elements for these poems as they move between England, Ireland, America and Europe. This is both a search for subject matter, and a signal of their interest in peripherality, the margins, the interstices and an angular or askance approach to place. Often a composed outsiderliness can be sensed in the subject matter, or in alienated but open speakers who are strangers in their own country or another, and existentially aware (or alert – alert to the dangers of past, present and future events/selves) observers.

The critical element of this thesis, *Places Where a Thought Might Grow: Culture, Liminality and the Troubles in Derek Mahon’s Lives (1972) and The Snow Party (1975)*, is a long piece of academically engaged literary criticism that assesses Mahon’s second and third collections of poetry. Using a theoretical filter of liminality, the work argues that Mahon strategically or deliberately writes the liminal into his poetry as a form of dissent against the cultural fixity apparent in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. This derives from a profound sense of alienation from his Northern Irish, Protestant/Presbyterian inheritance and a reluctance to assume a role akin to that of a communal spokesperson. To do so the work considers important and specific poems from both collections. These are contextualised around the Troubles, an era when unique and overwhelming political and religious extremes decisively and long lastingly impacted Mahon’s poetry. It reads these collections as a two-part project in which Mahon implements liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas (through the use of place, objects, subject matter and form) to interrogate absolutism and tribalism in the province. The work also argues that Mahon’s poems, influenced by existentialism, millenarianism and postcolonialism, are liminal zones where identity and subjectivity can be freely re-conceptualised and the unwieldy, prescriptive influence of such things as nationalism and history broken down. The poetry of some of Mahon’s Northern Irish contemporaries (notably Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon) is considered. The study also proposes that the influence of the writers Samuel Beckett and Louis MacNeice (key literary catalysts in Mahon’s divorce from his Northern Irish origins) are simultaneously at work in both collections, creating unresolvable tensions and paradoxes in these poems.
Declaration

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Completing the PhD in the Centre for New Writing has exposed me to a variety of visiting writers and intellectuals. Many of these have positively influenced my thinking around poetry both theoretically and creatively. At several points I have benefitted from the criticism and advice of Vona Groarke and also from Nick Laird, as well as the all too short counsel of Paul Muldoon in a one-off group workshop some rainy, darkening December afternoon. Their words of caution and encouragement are all embedded in here somewhere.

I have had the benefit too of various friends and colleagues (often both) in Manchester who have acted (knowingly or unknowingly) as sounding boards, patiently entertained various ideas and offered support over coffee and drinks as I’ve been trying to figure it all out. Huge thanks go to Ian Pople, Veronica Turiano, Evan Jones, JT Welsch, Iain Bailey, Vincenz Serrano and Nick Murgatroyd. Also, I would like to give a mention to anyone who has ever given me ideas about apocalypse over the last few years.

I am grateful to the organisers of the Heinrich Boll cottage artists’ residency for giving me the opportunity to stay at the property on Achill for two weeks. That experience was a creative quarry that I carry around, and the source for quite a few poems here, directly or indirectly.

Finally, thanks to my parents who I think have spent the last few years in varying states of confusion and anticipation of what the future might hold. Here it is.
FAST ENOUGH
Before our eyes it might be snatched away unto destruction.

– Lucretius,

*Of the Nature of Things*
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I am letting these events get out of order: the sun as it streams through the window after several hours of grey, (make a note of the changeable conditions), the family who launch a kite on the grassed area whenever the wind gets up and blows that newly mown smell across the room, the buoys in exactly the same place as last time I looked out over the quay.

A morning spent alone in this self-catering apartment speaks for itself: the white noise of the courtyard fountain, the purr and scrape of a passing helicopter, hubbub from other visitors unloading, or the building site’s pneumatic drill, the noisy ballet of bright yellow JCBs that pull off gravity defying plies and pirouettes.

There, without doubt, is the ocean, calm for the time being underneath blue patches in the sky which appear, disappear, reappear. Fields and disheveled thickets flank the road into town where the pavement comes to a halt, so cars and walkers panic the little hedge-dwellers as they squeeze by in single file.

A few men in baseball caps stack lobster pots on a slatted pontoon, gather brightly coloured, frayed rope. One by one they fling in those deadly traps, watch them gurgle on the top, before they sink down, down, down. Revise those notes on the changeable conditions, there’s the clear night sky from the same window, revelers outside the pub and spindly branches.

Tide-marked, the stony banks are exposed as the light-reflecting water sneaks out, past the run-down grain warehouse and that slumped trawler the world seems to have left behind. From all angles things seem to be secure with this endless waiting game,
inconsequential and fizzing secrecy, 
at ease keeping me in suspense.
Incredible, the way the middle aged man who takes care of their trees abseils from a substantial trunk strapped into his harness to leave us all in suspense as he hovers there like a hummingbird at nectar, sways almost undetectably in a plaid jacket and dark blue hard-hat, scuffed brown leather safety boots, snowdrop white lanyard trailing from a pocket. With both hands he grips the rope that he’s scampered up there to knot around this well-aged example’s calm blunted head, lets it slide bit by bit between metal loops to be lowered down, agile as a spider on a single string of silk, legs sprawled ready to establish a firm footing, an astounded breeze wafting at well-tanned arms. He checks the descent to explore, prune, nurture, cheered by the methodical work, and lets the afternoon fall on his concentrated face, each busy arm a plaid foil that causes him to float and straddle the distorted ground and sky, a temporary fixture amongst the period properties that gaze in both wonder and hushed fear at his presence amongst them. An unwelcome guest, his calling and sorties are seldom found inside houses: he showers the pavements and drives of Swinbourne Grove, sawdust and mulch, stacked timber lies to one side of its hacked stumps, each clean ended log admits sunlight and shows its age. Engulfed in the abrupt cacophony of a chainsaw engine, an anguished sputtering of crankshaft and exhaust, a terrible splintered coming together of teeth and bark, he will touch down amid this shambles and improbable enlightenment, where the cats, that seem to come with the back yard territory, and tarry on doorsteps, fences or under cars, sometimes glance past or squabble.
Stealth bombers, assassins and ninjas come to mind
though your call is mostly supernatural;
but are you out for a companion to postpone
your loner's ways, or purely for the kill,
to snatch a rodent in your talons, or do you
actually hope to contact the other side,
ghosts, spirits and presences? Ovid, one of many,
viewed you as a bad omen, skeptical death bringer,
unreadable harbinger. I try to break
the carefully worked code, eavesdrop on your night-ops,
out there in the woods, in the trees by the lake,
in the early hours, in the February chill,
imagine the unseen tactics, surveillance,
maneuvers. But how would you react to this, lay down
a curse on me for blowing your cover,
for letting slip your play, my disloyalty, or offer
some unassailable insight - leave it
to the expert, you’re up too late for this - then retreat
to your owl hole, back to your lonesome base? Tawny
bringer of death, convener of spirits and presences.
Post

(Text drawn from several exhibits on child refugees during WWII at the Imperial War Museum North)

1. Menu

I’m going to tell you something you have not heard before, first I’m going to tell you what I have for my meals: for breakfast we have one and a half slices of bread, sometimes we have jam with them, we have a cup of tea with it; for dinner we have spuds and gravy, and sometimes meat, as well as a cup of tea; for tea we have two slices of bread with jam sometimes, as well as another cup of tea.

2. The Eight Hills

Well, here I am at last settled down to live again. It may seem funny to you, but it is getting hotter and hotter and hotter. Most days it is ninety-eight in the shade (believe it or not). I supposed you will be pleased to know that I am at school. I have been at school for about two weeks now. The name of the school is Pridwin, it is the most expensive prep school in South Africa, and that is saying a lot. So you can see what kind of people are Mr and Mrs. Stirton. Although it is hot – very hot, there is a big garden with plenty of shade. The garden contains a tennis court, two garages and most important to me: fifty fruit trees. Besides all this it has a biggish fish pond, with fish in. The house, including the garden, stands in one acre. Now you may wonder what I do on a Saturday morning. First I went into town (Johannesburg) in Mr Stirton’s
car, then I went to his factory, to the bank to draw

about two hundred pounds for his labourers,
than to a café where I met about six male friends
(of course, I am always meeting Mr Stirton’s friends,

and actually I met fourteen people that morning.)
Then Mrs Stirton met me and took me to that dreaded
place, the dentist. When I came out again, still alive,

I went home in Mr Stirton’s car. He has an American
car, and Mrs Stirton has an English car. Everything
out here in S.A. comes from America. The cars

are American because they can climb hills
better than English cars. Do you know it is so hilly
out here in SA that I go up eight hills going
to school and nearly every hill is like Sidcup Hill
(yes, I still remember good old Sidcup). Then I always
have a friend to dinner on Saturday

and in the afternoon I go with my friend I had
to dinner to the bioscope (bioscope means pictures:
cinema – while we are about it a three-penny

bit is called a ‘tickey’). On Sundays I go to church
with friends and then go swimming in the afternoon
(always). It’s so hot out here in SA that everyone

has at least two baths a day and puts on
clean things also every day. I put clean shirt,
trousers, socks on Monday, then all clean things

Wednesday, then change again Saturday
and Sunday. The reason is because
I perspire and it is only healthy to do so.

3. Guides

Miss Fraser was unable to come to this meeting,
so Miss Foot took it. For some time we played a mouse game;
we stood at the back of the form room and every time

we guessed correctly the word Miss Foot ‘buzzed’ us,
we moved forward a step, and the first one to reach
the other wall, won. For the next game we stood in pairs
and the quickest of each pair to get a certain knot right received a card. After every knot we moved onto another party. The cards of each line were counted at the end. Then we went as usual to Dr. Brock’s room for discussions. We decided not to hold a meeting on the following week because of a school concert. The two cadets who were to do gardening on the next day were reminded of their job and we then settled down to hear Margaret speak on ‘Home Guides’. When she finished, we knew much more about this important branch of Guiding than before. Most of us could not stay any longer, so we had closing prayers and dismissal.
Snowplow

The snowplow cruises without trouble straight ahead. On rails. Like the disillusioned father of two who boosted his intent ghost and disappeared from the hotel one morning at breakfast and when after catching on something was wrong, delayed the ranger from the daily rounds and some maintenance, his mountain bike in the river. A crowd gathers concerned, to look out at it like the hearse that bore him away, till they’re needed elsewhere or too cold so it thins bit by bit. Their footsteps crackle like tinder and kindling. It could be any normal morning in the pool-hall, trees like lined-up cues, pine cones racked on the floor, crystal snippets of birdcall as banter to aim at the runaway because it’s his shot, so hurry up and take it, but there’s no way he’ll line this one up, no way he’ll stroll back to his room as if nothing’s happened along a section they’ve missed and now closed, shrouded now by a drift which is so set in it’s enough to test the genealogy that says those flurries are kin through which it comes, farming snow, folded white soil, that furrow of prepared road, or poison powder from tubs, chalk and detergent, this uninterrupted bleaching of day. It turns over and levels, possesses its own microclimate and strips vast lengths; through tissue comes bone.
Hurricane Season

The neighbourhood seems strange when it gets late,
I sip at the head of a cold glass of stout.
The trees bend and break in the hurricane season,
all one day of it. But the world turns for a reason.
For that we must defer to the facts of life.
Anyhow, when it’s passed we’ll breathe a sigh of relief.
Chrysanthemums wave like cheerleaders’ pom-poms (at last!),
a hedgehog sniffs a way out and slips our grasp.
Round the corner there’s an ochre spell; it will be short lived.
Naming these things has something to do with being loved.
Bus Shelter, Barrow-in-Furness

The facts in logical space are the world, the snowy owl scratching its nest on a mound of scrap metal, and a length of unmarked road where a generator chatters ear to the ground. I listen to the wind alive inside an empty blister pack, the confluence of oil spill and estuary.

Disintegrating between pale sea and sky you catch the terminal flight of leaf and spoke, another gift of structural amnesia. We worked all day and at night our influence in baggage handling got us half-drunk, striking us out of human memory.

From a breakers yard that washed up poet de Campos looks out to Piel Island, oasis of puritanism and piracy. He studies the blueprints for a cruise liner bristling with droplets of cloud-smelt. These things must simply be felt.

I have spent my nights dug in like infantry bath tub doubling as bed and water trough. Through this material rivers seethe, parks grow forlorn. I am dying, that is enough. When the final bulb in the foreign embassy goes out, there will be no one left to blame.
At Lunchtime

Out collecting faded shells going nowhere in particular, I wound up near the empty containers deposited on the beach’s machair, our surprise introduction has stayed with me since. The expansive shrill racket of geese, en-route to the wetlands where they summer, swept across the slanted pasture where a foal loitered in its mother’s shadow then skipped off to forage a far corner; a sandpiper made a break from the driftwood fence after it had struck a one-legged pose, glided off, doubled back – an imitation of kanji or farness lost in thought in the middle of a perfectly clear sky and the punctual shush of the waves.

It was a day after the storm had broken and it had been a relief to hear the rain impact the roof so abruptly. Cabbage whites skimmed gale spoilt rushes, or another beachgoer’s shoes had trampled them down, and dandelion clocks wafted by like scrunched up paper. As I got going, retraced my steps across the makeshift car-park, a group of surfers were taking time out by two minibuses, dripping salt water, eagerly deliberating the lunchtime weather report, one at a time then interrupting all together, half in and half out of their wetsuits. The sun was high. Everything had this fascinating zeal. I could smell the sea even as I was turning away.
Vandalism

Brought to the kitchen window
by a loud racket, a rummage
then a kind of clatter
I watch the elusive fox,
Obviously on a tight schedule,
raid another bin
and can’t believe my eyes;

when I go out first thing to tidy up,
I get a shock from the stolen eggs,
little and powder blue, the intricate
rifled nest like a waiting stretcher
for the smashed shells, ready
to take them out of the world.
Now it won’t leave my mind,

I’m immersed in that act
just like the intrigued youngsters
who can’t help but mob
the playing field
to inspect the bones
of a car that’s been crashed
and torched there;

morning, noon and night
they meet, roving reporters
that leave no stone unturned,
but are really none the wiser
and take their best guess, tempt fate
as to whether this was purely
accident or an ultimatum.
Right back there on the final visit we made to my grandparents’ bungalow, staring out of the window in the front room to allow the whole lot and everything we grasped about it to sink in, before we would tote all the furniture, ornaments, clothes, and most cautiously of all, the secret ancestral things, along the drive to neatly load them into the waiting removal van or the car in which they would be whirled off to the tip, jettisoned in some thrift store, or ensconced in our attic for safekeeping. Late June borders have reached an overblown frenzy, the quietly tenacious weeds poke out of cracks and joins, and a few hanging baskets sway like metronomes to keep time. We spot the glistening threadlike streaks of a snail across tarmac, point it out, then let ourselves falter awhile as if to deliberate over a rough sketch, a favourite spot that has become tougher to picture, how we might tread water and go along with the surf – powerless against the drag of its non-stop back and forth – alive to that immensity, its controlled force and singular discipline. It’s true that our grasp on how it all came to pass works loose, the way we walked out on that thoughtfully tended, late life haunt of robust colour one last time, as it becomes seasoned, right back at square one, by what the years entail, one after another.
Pull over and wind the window down
to consider these stunt artists, young
upstarts who perform cartwheels on the spot,
graceful spinners, brothers in flurry
and soundness of drive, sisters
in activity and plain style,
who circle, point and synchronise, throw
cautions to each episode of breeze, generate
and charge. Workaholics,

they’ve woken with a start,
initial drowsiness dispelled
in the buzz of blades and unbroken
whooshing as they absorb the blows.
See them kick up their heels and rejoice
at this turnaround in their luck as they fall, soft
and continually, head over heels
for playing fields and shabby lost cats
that cross supermarket car parks via
the recycling banks, a skyline blanketed in smog.

On a blustery restless day such as this
they demand to be the centre of attention,
a sheer apprehensible landmark (or blots
on a landscape) used to being given
the once over; skinnymalinks who’ve waved
away or shaken off the limiting clock
of winter and seem in the lightest of moods
together as they make clear their knack
for being in high places, or get up in arms
over their unfulfilled, perpetual urge
to reach an even greater altitude.
Trolleys

Waist height, I track myself in wing mirrors and windows all the way back to the parking space as I juggle shopping bags, recycling, car keys and wallet. Time to drive back, but not without scoping the place out so you don’t run him over, it’s ok he’s well out of the way, an inescapable shadow who shepherds dubious trolleys, down to the last stray one that’s drifted over to the sign that shows current fuel prices and that he grabs hold of casually, rounding them all up to lock them in the curved perspex pen. Two of his colleagues on the way out from their shifts, like working dogs, lend a hand and find it funny.

I put away the groceries, check the email and settle in again as an invader might back from a long campaign camped outside city walls, Troy or Carthage, loaded with ill-gotten spoils.

The window affords a view of students who cruise like conspiratorial wolves taking turns with it, past front gates and garden paths, in high spirits with one they’ve snatched from him, still in the same bright compulsory uniform, hanging risk on a stolen moment.
Cartography

We may learn both from the evidence of our senses and from experience that the inhabited world is an island.

– Strabo, Geography, Book I

Ship Canal

I warm my hands over an oil drum brazier while Adamson squats in the Big Ditch tapping a caisson with his calliper.

I’m trying to remember if I’m a worker stacking bales, or a navvy half-cut in the loam. Cottonopolis has us joined at the hip.

Stonehenge

I never wanted to be a chorus Neolithic, Aegean or otherwise. At least the light has been kind and pinpointed my aura.

Harvey

A bungalow surrounded by uncut grass, he studies old photographs through a magnifying glass. The horse head barometer forecasts rain and a sowester.

I lay by a window, its stained glass was a form of dopamine. He scratches an itch in a casino and Metabus straps a daughter to a spear, a reminder of our uneasy cartography.

Manitoba

Then I was lost in a blink of ice sheet and shaman, only to surface in Hudson Bay, that seventh heaven of brain freeze, petroforms and 7-Elevens.
The Cree were constructing a reservation.

_Calchas_

Was it the voracity of my altar going
or the billow of birds in the sky
that shook my apoplexy from stern to bow,
then brought about such fatal hilarity?

_Irish Sea_

The long wave and its presage spill on the shore,
salt air fills with a scramble of syntax.

I tether the rowing boat to constrain its oars,
stricken as a stone in Carrowmore.

‘Attention all shipping’, something is afoot.
My father attempts to unravel the flax.

_Wheldale_

To know one thing is to know its opposite.
Post consumer packaging and monolithic
bronzes were the primordial strata
falling off the end of a conveyor belt.
Now I await sarcophagi or stacking.

_Moorland_

I found an amphitheatre of flatland
filled with chimneys and passenger carriages.
Firework flux, the path between gasometers.

_Creation_

Shaped me up as a woodcut
destined for the Nuremburg Chronicle,
then as a brooch that pinged the floor
of a granite courtyard.
Its jewel could have been the bubble in my spirit level. Together I contain all the pitch of a shout in the night.

**Northern Lights**

A Sami, I’ve been cowering in the wreck of a caravan, keeping my mouth closed.

Those fox tails twitched and a shower of sparks expanded from the Neolithic into the age of the holiday home.

**The Steps Outside the National Gallery**

On some black Monday I think I was standing on the steps outside the National Gallery eating a tray of takeaway sushi.

As vapour tripped off the headlights of cars I could hear the chiselling of granite, a French soldier whimpering in a chimney somewhere West of Austerlitz.

**The Great Western**

Imagine me as a beast living on in silence ill at ease in the cinders, having stepped beyond the point at which the gauge divides, air released from the bone; washing whistles from the line.

**Thaw**

A gust knocks at the windows of the operations tower and I come to as a disgruntled air traffic
controller. I watch the snow melt outside the terminal doors. Consummate diction was my tragic flaw; something had to give.

*St. Ives*

I leave the wharf, its fishing boats,

(one of which I washed in on), and slate roofs

dusted with yellow moss,

climb the hill, back inside the kiln.

A common seal flops on the breakwater.

*Clearing*

Each new climactic ghost or overlap calibrates a new scale on the stave of our progress trap.

I have glimpsed a cold heaven, a rookery in the pine.

*So What?*

Leaving America alone, for the time being, a mythical future, I am going over to somewhere without tenses, look, I am going to write myself Irish! Furious, inverted world.

*Sunflower*

‘When they found your body, giant X’s on your eyes’. Radiocarbon
disclosed the golden angle of my spirals, the flow of my slumber, its diurnal motion.

The ventriloquism of that volcanic sorrow is mine in a way and stretches East to Tennessee.

*Lobster Cages*

When I walked past their creaking frames, post and lintel, the bare bones of ballast, I recalled the inside of a kabuki theatre.

I was next to the chiming Atlantic. Islands, passports, the imprints of migrants twisted in nets as daybreak sunk between channels.

*Heart’s Content*

We were fresh from the slipways huddling between the row upon row of tenements with our buckets of pilchards. The rain arranged itself into a corridor of spires, cold, stark, all the way to Nova Scotia. They were building a hut that stood out from the grey.

From a barque in Sennen Cove sunk the yard upon yard of permalloy, there was such anabasis in that deepsea oracle. Its shiver belonged to a wakerife changeling. We have our own grasp on oceanography. Whatever we hauled, we hauled over coals that day.

*Hearth*

All in all, my centre corresponds with the Orion nebula. I have ticked through the night like an embryo and grown tired of this flame, the opposite of stone.
Looking at a Jack B. Yeats

By the time he’s really started to nail that expressionistic, vital style such as ‘The Two Travellers’, the paint’s all scratchy and smudgy and smeared – this might as well be a trademark, what with its leached primary colours as it leaps out at you across the room, irresistible as the expressions on the left-of-centre couple, part stone cold sober and part deadpan; so the exhibition rolls ever on, and the later work seems so obvious, so much like it’s saying that’s what I really meant all along.
The Outside World

After van Brekelenkam's, Interior with a Lady Choosing Fish

How is it that you fail to recognise
when I arrive stinking of mackerel
and cod, gravely hypothesising
about the waves breaking on the other side
of an open window and the sky brightening
on the tiled floor of the kitchen?
So much in chaos, just a hint towards disarray,
but only very deftly is it spilled,
the layers are drawn together by the head instinctive
and the patient eye will prove its own reward.
The night will fall, stars come out after all,
then the smallest islands will be intact and obvious.
I wait at your door around angular weather,
startling the systems with an oil skin and sou’wester,
trailing reality; show us out or let us in.
The Den

Start
by finding suitable bushes or undergrowth,
somewhere inconspicuous but user friendly.
Bend branches against their will into loose
curves (as thoughts of budded, flowered
seclusion cross their sappy minds), and lash
them with tape unraveled from undesirable
disowned cassettes. Drape these with thicker,
leafy boughs, snapping and transferring so much
abundance with the ceremony to which
they should be entitled, then your intent
and shelter starts to materialize, as if out
of nowhere. Salvaged from the inventories
of DIY stores and fly tips, a floor designed
from spare crates and cardboard boxes.
Augment and strengthen this with fence panels
that a strong wind knocked over.
See it, a nippy but enticing affair dreamt
up and realised using the same boyish
methods and know-how of survival fact or lore
passed on to your father, probably from his
father, right down to the particular stashes
of arcane or illicit belongings kept there
under wraps; the den evades history itself,
will be chanced upon in the distant future
like a grave and ransacked for its offerings.
Ready for occupation, you ought to make sure
it’s invisible and will go undetected,
be certain that it has blended with its location
and grown in, acclimatised; move gradually
backwards onto the path and see if it
disappears, if it does, try to spot your creation,
catch it out. Take your leave of it till the next time,
but retrace in your head the route back: learn
its outdoor noises, secure its confidence
through idle chatter and small talk,
it has to be positive you can keep stum.
Eventually just abandon it completely:
now it’s no longer such a distraction
having outgrown all prospective lodgers
(who’ve gone astray) in that quasi-wilderness,
where it lives out its secretive, solitary days, grows
more distant each second, like an old
schoolfriend whose updates, the texts and missed calls,
get less and less frequent, a lost cause.
Spiny freestyler, I'll never come close
to such range; whole continents
bend fast around his spry fins.

He runs roughshod over our lives:
so there’s no answer to this plucky drop
in the ocean, where it’s sink or swim.

Now, here’s the catch: he writhes
in a trance of scales, runs out of breath
in the grip of the flimsy landing net.

So his doubles (identikit in
every way) without him, school and scud
through the undertow, this one a spent

force absent from their briny ride.
Beneath the beachcaster’s windowsill
sea-thrifts clutter and blush.
A Sherpa

Neither of them stuck around of course:
My Grandfather – who showed up on our doorstep
straight from his time in the Himalayas,
having taken on the appearance
of some legendary monster –
soon bored of his self-help book, its mantras,
brought out the reels, hooks and waders, his passport;

but also in tow his new best friend, a sherpa,
who when the whole house was still in bed
rose early to draw maps of Fermanagh;
and to keep himself from getting homesick,
flashbacks of the good old days at arms length,

worked two day weeks in the removals game,
humming to himself
as he fetched kitchen appliances
across town, a folded snapshot
in his wallet as always
that showed prayer flags strung around a monastery
on a cloudy mountain top.
Terracotta

1. Alfred Waterhouse

As Alfred Waterhouse made his way through Bloomsbury

he had extinction on the brain;
accompanied by the hiss of gas lighting,

he stumbled upon a sack of coal
split open in Russell Square.

Each anthracite nugget
was a bundle of fiber optic

awaiting the tincture
of alchemical expertise.

2. The Compass

The dial of my compass
is the fastest

in living memory
but spins in one direction only,

like a disorientated spermatozoan, towards Lascaux.

3. The Apothecary

I was sitting inside the stomach
of a blue whale during a break

in the installation
of the full size replica. My back

was up against one side
of its enormous ribs as I played

the apothecary with my makeshift
still, rolling papers and tobacco tin.
Say you are grateful to have passed through this valley, for the once in a while flashes of the road’s regular chevrons, the bird of prey’s precisely trained eye, its aerial reconnaissance, feeding information back to earth like a satellite, the small lake lying low behind a safety fence (the result of another drier than dry summer out west). One of the neighbours is out watering numerous pot plants and smoking. She puts down the brass watering can then walks over to the chicken wire fence as you unload the gear from the boot. The air up here is much cooler. Isn’t this a special place? she asks. A couple of deer, that live on their nerves, nuzzle plants and spend part of the afternoon going through dance steps, more impromptu than choreographed, like they are alone except for their audience, nature. A kinetic poise is exercised in those springy legs and pliable dappled backs; you see antlers, perfectly steady, that spread out and up. Dangling from a gazebo’s pointy roof a set of wind chimes provide a random backing track, that sails from outside to about halfway through the kitchen; you try to cue in, till you tire of them, every samey whimsical refrain. In all the sinks there’s a spider dicing with death. When you unlock the cabin’s french doors and go down the verandah steps you find yourself deep in a forest, the scent from masses of flourishing pines hits you smack in the face. And your hyperactive, salivating pup comes bouncing out to keep you occupied throwing old tennis balls and to chase down her chewed frisbee. A courteous Fall sun, burnished and circular, beams above the golf course’s immaculately manicured greens and triangular flags: a luminous, sprawling entity that coasts through the world on a whim, without ties to anything or anyone. Come dusk this gives way to one of the clearest, widest night skies you’ve known (no such thing as light pollution this far from town) which puts on a one-off show. You’ve cracked open a Sam Adams or two, their necks, ours too, crane until they fade, for two identical, hasty shooting stars. Tomorrow you will stop by arid smarting Sedona and Slide Rock where sightseers douse themselves and zip down the slick abrasive stone chute. So find an affinity with the ephemeral, be a delinquent and hope
to land in a place you prefer to be, somewhere
that seems right and tells you, this is where you belong.
Outrun every worry, kiss goodbye
to your return ticket and recent acquaintances,
every responsibility you can think up: don’t
tiptoe any longer around the finer points: take off
faster than a bullet, without a thought, without care.
Anthology

We get big cats like the beast of Bodmin,
flick through again and there’s Loch Ness,
its monster, more outlandish, as a rule
they tend towards this globally. Now cite bigfoot,
the yeti, chupacabra and the mothman.
The index has them alphabetically,
entries that expand on just names
to propose theories, sightings, grains of truth, shreds
of evidence. It is nigh on impossible to reach
any popular or critical consensus,
all photographic or video encounters are so
disputed and conflicting as to render
them inconclusive. Each elusive creature’s account
rests on anecdote and presumption, that afternoon
the cryptozoologist thought he heard
the damned thing stop to lurk, a rustle in the bushes,
some sort of anomaly or hybrid.
Outsiders

That tour down the Shannon keeps coming back to me,
early starts and late nights, a fortnight
in the middle of July elongated
in front of us, to fit in excursions to pubs
and historic monuments, kicking off
at Portumna, then dropping by Banagher,
Kilgarvan, or a random spot where my grandfather
wants to try his luck coarse fishing and is already

assembling his tackle in anticipation,
the groundbait and tupperware dishes
filled with maggots dyed bright red, green and blue,
the landing net in which he hopes to garner
pike and perch, roach and bream,
that will prove handy when sifting
his pipe and flat cap out of the river after
a mishap; the sputter of that sleek white cruiser

chasing us down all the time,
those incongruous routines that spring up
on holidays appeasing this crew
of non-committal backseat drivers,
not missing a beat though the beat’s unusual.
After a week we reached Carrick-on-Shannon,
whose name rambles like regulars trousered
on the Guinness that used to be rolled into

the old barrel store that’s now tourist information,
took turns at the wheel to bounce us
along the choppy waterway, spray flinging itself
at our faces and our wind blown hair,
agreed to disagree over who should map-read,
the same way I make sense of adult
co-ordinates, references, measure
distance come against time lost.
Standing outside my double room,
that was someone else’s and another’s
before that, I wait for the storm
to show me that I have outgrown
the place I come from. The newly painted
balcony is strangely still save the vending
machine and ice dispenser that murmur
near reception. Across from here salutatory
leaves nosedive onto sun loungers
and taut pool covers, or backfire from the striped
khaki awnings, in a final flourish that showcases
their vibrant disposition, as the light starts
to go and night falls inch by inch and unstoppably.
This prolonged spell of dry weather seemed set
for good and predictable, but now the air
virtually drips, close and muggy. The moon
in its last quarter makes faint but composed
the perfectly trim grounds of the grand residences
along North Decatur Road. It looks ominous
for the unsheltered side of the road, so I take
cover with gratitude and envisage
a bygone exile who experiences nature
with heightened senses, and feels only
confetti-leaves that grace the trunk of his back
and brush the branches of his fingers, who hopes,
with a kind of nervous excitement, to enjoy
this while it lasts. Now the more adventurous
creatures, regular authorities on this neck
of the woods, take advantage of a calm
that can’t stay put much longer: coyotes knock over
dustbins that line up on driveways, rifle
through the haul and flee; raccoons scuttle
under porches; a bat, a carbon-dark blur,
the same brownish-black as peat after it’s cut
and stacked and waits to catch fire, circles above
Emory village, tagging Starbucks, Supercuts,
Rise-N-Dine. In the churchyard down the road
from this well visited ‘HQ’, rows of pumpkins
seem to taunt the storm as they blaze, jam-packed
together in the open air, beneath a homespun
banner that declares ‘fundraiser’ in giant letters.
At the same time a border shrub seems out of its
yellow and purple flowered depth, keen to stay put
in apprehended soil and aware, for now,
of the state of things. But uniquely restful
in the shakiness of its place, like those who put faith
in the activities of street, undergrowth
and foliage – settled overseas for a little while, at ease with its ambience, bounded by the woods and the city. This will, he says, thinking out loud, all be over in a flash so best take it all in. Atlanta’s sleek mid-town towers are just about visible; middle distance rumblings trigger a car alarm. I see the rain push in concordantly and minutes later it’s torrential. New tributaries or small-scale flash floods cascade down the road the balcony overlooks, grids overflow and froth at intervals. Grounded foliage and litter that have been bored out of their minds go rafting down North Decatur towards campus, riding the rapids unchecked. People run for cover the same way. I don’t know about you but last night I could hear a few big claps escalate in my vicinity… the weather girl will announce the next morning as I sit in a wicker chair by a big window, and stare at the flat screen on a wall in the breakfast bar…our household is certainly expecting more bumps in the night to come. Soon other doors swing open and my fellow guests emerge from their rooms jolted away from late evening business and astounded, to give thanks for the spectacle, maelstrom and variation. The balcony starts to take on a life of its own.
This disheveled rabble, 
these make-do effected nobodies, 
are more than passable stand-ins 

for ourselves: all over the shop 
with each prod or gust of wind 
and living on borrowed 

time. In the afternoon, 
when the sun catches them, 
what show offs. Here we are 

in our best light: turned out, 
possible with just the bare minimum, 
nearly making sense to you.
After Eckener’s crew turned over the hold during the return leg, I did well not to divulge the total exuberance that accompanied my course. Come off it, this was no daylight robbery, they forced me to cover my passage chopping vegetables in the galley.

I had hidden for so many hours behind the quantities of luggage, equipment and mail bags; only I encountered that rush, only I grasped the discretion and exact strategy needed to travel outside all boundaries, with more guile than in the past.

It was a long way to fall I can tell you. As I glanced out the gondola’s neat windows I noticed particular clouds from the back of a classroom atlas, cumulonimbus, cirrus; my name disappeared into thin air, earthbound, in a cacophony of silverware, washbasins, propellers, fashion accessories, tables and wires; but I had a short-lived stardom on the makeshift landing ground by the windswept shore of Lake Constance. I guaranteed them everlasting acclaim, the crowds came running to applaud my feat.

Without doubt the sceptics will bang on about publicity stunts and self-promotion – any means of leaving me out in the cold. Though in theory a failure it will prove hard to dismiss my audacity; I only ever wanted to beguile.

Now I scheme to vanish once and for all from this lonely joint and keep a fever in my spirit, craving, again and again, the extreme. Acknowledge me when looking skyward.
World City

‘But maybe space, or geography does not work like that anymore (if it ever did). Maybe places do not lend themselves to having lines drawn around them.’

– Doreen Massey

1.

Passengers mill around prominent boards
that regularly transform themselves and make
new routes open up in front of us, gate numbers,
departure times and destinations – JFK,
Hong Kong, Charles de Gaulle, Heathrow.
Then they slope off to look for a seat, duty free,
buy bottled water or coffee in well appointed spots.
See how this one has a view of the runway!

2.

A quick browse on Amazon
for poems, an impulse buy;
_in stock_, it says, _customers_
_who bought this item also bought…_

3.

By all appearances we’re still in Salford
though the names around here beg to differ,
Florida Quay, Anchorage Quay;
and of course there are no quaint little fishing
villages, no mangroves, but I lose my train of
thought none the less, as we take a
pre-performance stroll over the canal
to the Imperial War Museum and back.

4.

In this day and age Abakhan fabrics seems
an anachronism or anomaly all lit up
on Oldham Street; it could almost transport me back;
this town used to be the centre of the world.
Freely they brush them off, the hours, dazed by the heatwave, the boy racer’s hard house and his Volkswagen’s loud exhaust, nightowls who blow vuvuzelas, consult with google on smartphones and don’t notice the museum security detail with his many keys and walkie-talkie who makes rounds close to the railings, nods to his homeless friend in the doorway opposite, and can’t wait to put his feet up. Meanwhile a backpacker arrives in town too late (or should that be early?) to find a bed and the lightest, briefest of rains dabbles the tube station entrance and exit, the takeaways, the square and the taxi rank whose kerfuffle I negotiate and where cabbies ask their fares, ‘Where to?’ then zip them off to an all night bar, a hotel or the airport, a perfect example of how the world is what was given, the world is what we make. The flurry of shutters going up and down encapsulates them, as does the roadside preacher with her placard and an encyclopedic knowledge of the gospels’ most doom laden passages, the street sweeper that whirs and inhales wrappers, leaflets and cigarette ends from the kerb-side around where Malet Street meets Montague Place, its driver on auto-pilot who will make tea in the canteen at his shift’s end next to a radio and get a head-start on the new day’s disposition. On the steps outside College Hall the gang of exchange students blather, smoke and continue their drinking, a cleaner touches his keycard to the sensor, pigeons fluff out their feathers in the eaves, a permanent feature or catch-all that fitfully sound out the progress of parks, roadworks or construction, above the change and uncertainty of the capital that sprawls from the river, nonchalant, where the traffic will build before it thins through suburbs then open space, the many windowed blocks where both the flat-mate and the flat-broke will go about their morning routine, survey the slick pavement, balcony gardens and bright shafts that skim cement, where the day has already started to happen.
Frog

After a coloured ink drawing on paper by Matsumoto Hoji, found in a colour-printed picture album, 'Meika Gafu', 1814

He is left over from the so-called floating world. The name that has been assumed by the artist or that his teacher has put forward is the gift of time. In this case, as with all of his frogs, he has splashed the ink on with his pipe, it’s your guess how he came up with this process. This one frog betrays through his face a sense of bemusement, like a dignitary after a state of the nation address.

So it would be silly to anticipate what next, pleasure and refinement being otherworldly pursuits, the ink seems strongest on the master copy’s plain paper, our amphibian deep thinker, thinking deep thoughts for an age which he plans to return to later.
Towpath

Drawn down by the airy brush of its shade,
I stumble across a stretch of canal
disorganized as a lost and found due to the spoil
the dredger sieves from unknown depth, that
escapes around fences, onto waste ground or flat
back lorries – an unpromising haul of dray horse
bridles, rotted wood and silver casks, road-signs,
shopping trolleys, an old boiler that lies like a tomb.
Its operants have steeped their persons there for the best
part of the day and for a second glance up at me
from the channel like a gang of water sprites, ankle
deep in the upturned silt bed of the canal
sprayed out at the business end of the barge,
their hands trained on the goods that drip,
glisten and edge slowly up the conveyer.
They send stuff soaring, jump from barge to bank
as if to move in and out of a landscape – dented,
crumpled signage long ignored, spinning trolley wheels,
bright green tufts of weeds and grasses, the spill of silt
never ends – as I appreciate the way
this one-off, a detour to this startled, shady
towpath leads to the hand-me-downs of industry,
stirs up a likely substitute for the lack of current
and pulls at me. Giving back their full attention
to the belt and the murky water, waders all matching,
they seem so eager to bring up the past.
Elegy for Nirvana

1. Kurt Cobain Towards the End of his Life

An improvement on the covers, home demos, dilapidated practice spaces, DIY road trips and teenage angst now you’re the darling of a curious mainstream – hours wasted in green rooms for repetitive interviews, playing ‘who am I?’ on the tour bus with post-it-notes, a melee of clouds across the sky, one flight case a no show at the airport, and groupies who don’t miss the irony when the breakdown happens in Rome. Your unkempt style and attitude fit the bill and carried all the way from Seattle to Manchester in 1991. You’d never claim to be the last word and wrote the lyrics (skewered the hypocrites and bandwagon jumpers, channeled Beckett) on the fly in a soulless hotel room or by the placid Wishkah, the banks flaunting like seams at low tide and its simple reassertion.

“Teenage angst has paid off well …” “This is your time, how do you feel about such an explosion, a meteoric rise?” the host probes. Impossible to tell, aside from the long blonde fringe and general impassiveness, what your inner-voice is saying about this tenure as generational champion you never wanted. The support group tune up and sound-check, roadies unload. You started to sketch your life’s thesis in high school, light years from this picturesque dawn over Villa Borghese. Back then I was too young to realise you’d be forever twenty seven in the Spotify and Youtube playlists I visit at the desk or after work, to relive your slow exit from the main stage; or know how long, at a loose end and wanting answers, I’d spend throwing around offbeat conspiracy theories.

2. The State of Play, as Evidenced in St Anne’s Square
Drinking less now that the clocks have gone forward
but still slaving away at the thesis
when not hanging around town on a weekday
for no real reason, like now, as the lunch hour comes
and goes, with me watching it from a bench beside
the monument-cum-fountain, where I must have re-
read the one page of this novel a zillion
times, finding each time a sentence that didn’t

fully register, when the busker starts up
again and reels off with aplomb a couple
of covers I recognise from *In Utero*.
In the pocket of this jacket I haven’t worn
in years, I find not change, but a screwed up receipt
for agua mineral and gasolina,
from Malaga, Spain, which reminds me of that
uncared for garage, a feeling of being lost.
Sleeping Through

The frozen blue tits’
cornflower tipped feathers
are shaped like tailcoats
slipped on for a funeral.

You can see through the tiny
entrance hole into the birdbox,
before you take it down
and carry it away like a coffin,

how the cold snap and crinkling
frost has taken them unaware,
and left their delicate alighted
bodies fixed and stiff

as the nails you banged into
the tree last autumn at the top
of a ladder, satisfied by the
hammer’s blunt side, flat and true.

Dear friends, goes the chill’s song
as it stifles a cold tear,
I was powerless to stop this;
but look at us now, one and the same.

Their breasts have stalled,
trapped serenely
in between breaths,
and entertain a visitor

that steals in through the pencil
lead of their beaks, to leave them
frozen in time, their still sequin eyes,
unmoved and centre stage.
Graffiti

Blink and you’ll miss the shifty young rebel
in his Nike hoodie, shouldering a backpack’s
worth of aerosols, the world he passes drowned out
by headphones, slightly stoned; he shadows the tracks’
acrid, scraped route, gains cuts and bruises

as he scrambles over fences shaken down
by brambles, or rides the slippery, steep
embankment sprinkled with tins, plastic bags
and those always offbeat misnomers the lost toy,
jumper or shoe; the men from Balfour Beatty

have got their High-Vis outfits filthy
and slog away into the weekend, a weekend
of giddy revellers and travellers, that spills
over into Piccadilly’s steel and glass façade –
switched on, hi-tech, big screened, billboarded –

like a paean to change, from where the time-tabled,
the short of time, and eventually the long time
servant with his high pressure jet will see
in broad daylight his tag, a cryptic calling card
that’s taken an age to perfect, structures that house

electronics covered with more off the cuff
scribbles and doodles, the old carriages
on sabbatical in the maintenance yard,
enjoying the downtime, and some old folks
taking in the view from the footbridge.
"Say No More"

*Archipelago*

A string
of islands
floated together;

one for every
day of the year,
or so the story goes.

*

*You Are Here*

It’s on a different scale, sights
and sounds; research then local walks,
attractions, the river’s tinted

mirror or scrap of sky. Right
now I’m set adrift but encouraged;
all of it’s a race against the clock.

*

*jpeg*

Is there a point to prove
through these images
and Instagrams

(the insistent and in Polaroid
and vintage effects)
that only exist

at one remove?
I’m having a hard time deciding
if the nets,

that unoccupied
lifeguard hut,
are some kind of emblems.

*

*Sartre on Clare Island*

Like entering another dimension
to step off the ferry and wander around –
fields, dry stone walls, the Cistercian

Abbey and lighthouse, O’Malley’s castle
and the beach-pitch with its goals not too far off,
then perch on the sea wall

and flick through Modern Times,
or just stare at the mainland staring back at me,
unmoved, immoveable as J.P.

a cover star, blasé as hell
in a sheepskin jacket, smoking his pipe
on a bridge over the Seine.

*

Fishery

It’s no surprise
that the gridded fishery
at Delphi

sometimes darkens
instead of shimmers,
since it has to contend

with these mountains
and a sky that can’t make its mind up
using it as a vanity mirror.

*

A Lift

I go to bed unsure
if the driver
of the Range Rover

slowed to offer me a lift,
twenty minutes
into my walk

to the deserted village at Slievemore,
because he was
kind-hearted

and the temperature
below freezing, or he could tell
I was a perfect stranger.
Distraction

On the day of the monsoon,
a daddy long legs
trapped between window

and double glazing; schoolchildren
to the side of the road
that skirts Clew Bay

car counting with clipboards
and clicker-counters; small boats
and diving birds alike gently practice

trampolining, as the doors of a coach
parked in the famine memorial lay-by
breathe and open.

* 

In A New Light

Taken aback as they whir by,
their swoosh an almost silence,
going at full tilt.

Earlier, at the start of a day’s drive to Galway,
the curveball of road closures, course markers
and diversions put in place

for the Tour of Ireland,
grounds for seeing myself and this place
in a new light.

On the news in the bar
of the West View Hotel
reports of a coming together.

* 

Old Head

High tide claims
the rock pools for itself
and edges up the beach.

Next the boats
tied at the pier,
high and dry for a few hours,
will lift off and come within reach.
A few teenagers fool around
get soaked feet or outsmart the water,

laugh and screech
and the noise easily travels,
asks us to remember.

*

Ocean Lodge

The powerful swell
gives a couple of surfers
short shrift,

drifters, cast-offs,
irrelevant as far as it’s concerned;
the waves all along give up the ghost.

*

Babble

Stepping stones in a flooded stream
like a comic touch –
good for nothings;

but I hope this walk
will offer clarity,
some distance

in the way of that hawk,
a speck of dust
high above in the clear sky.

*

Downpour

Another drenching tonight
as blatant as white noise,
or a car radio in tunnels

and under bridges,
around heavily built up
or remote areas,

enough to wake the dead;
down at the harbour
they get clanking masts instead.

*

*Sea Cottage*

There are summer nuances –
open windows

and the drone
of a solitary fly,
a smart-assed trespasser

who gets in then out,
heat haze,
the front’s natural air

conditioning, non-stop birdcall;
I might have paired
today off with Picasso’s blue period,

Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*
now those goings on
that are always most pronounced –

smog, the din of roadworks
and traffic jams,
cars blasting chart music

or hip-hop – seem ages off.

*

*Kelpies*

A salmon on its way to spawn
takes a leap of faith’
at the weir;

Upstream horses
contemplate then
lap the river’s sheen.

*

*Limits*

Where the gravel track tails off
into shallow sounding water,
stop number fourteen
on the archaeological trail,
the honeycombed skirt
of the clapper bridge,

segued and obliged
your impulsive, cloudless roaming
through Louisburgh’s

near deserted limits,
steering us towards things
that for so long have figured,

the big picture, what is rusted,
what is a wreck
and the free rein of our recce,

inadvertent as Croagh Patrick’s steep cone
and a small fleet of lasers
on their way back to Glenans sailing club.

*

Flaura and Fauna

To think I almost overlooked
Accony’s stealthy tenants,
the white wildflowers

going undercover, sitting tight
beneath the metal gate
on the track

that leads down to the quay
and the handsome,
glinting but empty new build.

Every so often a car
towing a trailer of kayaks
might brush past and make them flinch

against the lowest bar,
counteract its rust and mud splashes
with their just washed cleanliness.

*

Sound

A sound so out of the way
and godforsaken
nobody can bring themselves
to give it a name. Further along
and near a gnarled fence,
a beachcomber’s paradise,
a pick ‘n’ mix
of sand, pebbles
and all kinds of shells

amidst them other intermediaries –
plastic
bottles and buoys,
pallets, desiccated wood,
a tyre, some toys
and frayed rope,
like Noah
after the flood,
a long way from home.

*

_The End_

Clouds move in and out of view,
aerial traffic at a crawl,
snail’s pace, snail mail,

quiet and deliberate like pall –
bearers underneath the casket.
A plague of midges at Bunowen river,
an existential allegory
in the town centre;
the river bed puts on its thinking cap

and takes up philosophy.
Two dogs chase around the beach
like survivors of a catastrophe –

heaps of seaweed, flotsam and jetsam
lapped up and spat out by breakers
that recite their lines: strophe, antistrophe.
A Mixed Blessing

The day the reporter asked me what I remembered of it I was on my lunch break. I hesitated to speak as he held the dictaphone just beneath my chin, in the middle of Manchester’s stone, steel, or glass skeleton, then in the way a vane reads the wind, my head span from schism of a decade ago, the offices evacuated and cordoned, a morning which, exploded minute by minute, lay on the line disaster, a telephoned warning, everyone hurried out under a speculative sky around Corporation Street’s landmarks as the aftereffects spiral out from carnage and wreckage, the buildings’ shrill sirens, into a scene transformed, its anniversary just around the corner, a good day for shoppers and sightseers to stroll this way and that, right as I am more or less thrown by his bringing up a ‘worst case scenario’ that is now unthinkable.
Replay

‘The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.’
– Elizabeth Bishop

The hailstones kick up a fuss on the window ledge,
a harsh batter on the roof of the car in the drive
or on glass, like snare drums and faulty water pipes.
By the front door one hedge has thinned from disease
(fungus or whitefly) and shrinks further when it spots
the barrage of a second stronger wave,
ready made for high strung commentary, slow motion
to be played over and over and over and over,
that scatters folk to the bus stop and the odd jobs man.
But something has sent the sky over the edge,
for it to launch all the hail it’s got, that ruckus,
and try the hedge for size, the lawn and drive
all but gone and watching over it all, high and dry
on their sill, a collection of shells from specific
beaches (there are no such things, all beaches are related,
but you get the picture) their lids a dirtyish white,
less than a teenth of those grains stashed inside,
and flecked through with dashes of red and blue,
either smooth or corrugated. Hold one to your ear,
it will sound not like hail, but the sea.
A Few Hours in Liverpool

After the reading the docks are all bright lights big city, but the street doused in dirty water, alcohol or urine has other ideas. Commuters sprint walk in business casual, carry a guitar or pull suitcases to the station, at the platform boyfriends and girlfriends secure a parting kiss, embrace to bursts of security announcements, the war memorial’s wreaths stand out, the taxis line up at the rank where a man inhales chips from the wrapper, the university buildings are lit up but deserted, no action in the bookies either, no punters to apply different systems or Aristotelian logic, the wind gusts, threatens a storm surge, to tear down or uproot, and don’t forget the water, the tide’s analgesic, ferries docking and heading out; in Shamrock’s Irish-American bar they haven’t moved on from the early 90s, the stereo forbids conversation with Cotton Eye Joe, sports and gameshows are muted on big screens, regulars, on a shoestring, on stools prop up the bar, reflected in shop windows a National Express coach edges round the bend, above it all, weather beaten, bird shitted, like an absurd figurehead, a scale model statue of the Statue of Liberty.
Black Bear Cub in Snow

After an ink and colour drawing on silk by Mori Shuho, 1799

This cub has a secret affinity
for the wilds it treks through. Plush but tough
as winter itself, his dirty tapered claws
and crafty stare alert to how things stand,
more to him than he lets on. Each single thing touched
by the snow’s intentions. Out on his own,
in a strange patch for the first time, the knuckled

bow’s drop a tickle on his ear, how the new flakes
settle in his fur and erase his paw prints,
the poor visibility, green-blue shoots poking
through the only colour. A feisty survivalist,
we have burst in on him, that gentle slope
of white-enveloped, stifled earth, and what is
either frozen water or a precipice
where he has skidded to a halt. Jittery

at the crack of forest floor, could be hunters
or felling, he steers clear of the farmer
repairing a barn, exuberant children
playing chase outside their village and their parent’s
limit, even though they intrigue him. The snow
occludes and makes confidants of them all.

Although we have taken him unawares,
distracted him from chores the habitat demands,
this little one knows soon he will be more
than capable of getting the better of you,
his intentions for now, to explore, to grab
those tantalising winterberries
that have his name on them. A cough carries

and he bolts from a gang of habited monks,
undeterred so reminiscent of his own kind,
who follow closely one after the other
into the austere visibility of winter’s
haze – where they tread discreetly and single minded
between tenures, fight cold with cold
and nature’s privacy takes their breath away,
though they’re no strangers to the back of beyond.
At the funfair, the height of summer, what everyone wants is a near death experience, something other than the park’s staples – attentively shaped beds, the boating lake and surrounding path – I gravitate towards the neon lit, ghoulish attraction, cars that disappear through doors on one side and emerge at the other with riders nervously excited or unimpressed, one inconsolable child who cries his eyes out, as the young man working the ticket booth gets on the mic and over spooky strung out music shouts that ‘this has got to be the most terrifying thing in the world.’ Bright as an arrangement of azaleas, but flashy and fiendish of face, it has skull designs, a mind of its own, a chilling laugh that is all spirited away when it breaks down and as he says, after the blown fuse or faulty wire has been rooted out, has to be seen to be believed.
Ruin, England

1.

Facelift

What I can’t decide on is what to make of the GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY’S GOODS WAREHOUSE, (the words still clearly whitewashed at the top, high above the faux waterfall that’s become a locus of unspoken wishes, a receptacle for small change and smells of chlorine), which converted, in the nick of time, became another bold new development, a leisure complex that consists of a casino, fitness studio and an AMC cinema, as I strive to keep at least half a mind on the pedestrian crossing’s indecisive little man and the road seems to draw a line through one thing and then lead to another.

2.

Climbing Frame

There was always a skirmish to see who could clamber up those rungs the fastest to sit on top of it like a king, or play at being the lookout. One way or another, we all found our own approach to sit astride it, with all the ups and downs
of the local park, balancing, adjusting and sizing up the drop.

3.

*Tar*

Molehills of tarmac that spill from their trundling hopper and wheelbarrows, they rake them out then flatten them with the roller. I follow the temporary pedestrian route through ear splitting noise, stop on the other side of the road to see the tarred steam, sticky bubbles rise up from the punished, acrid surface. The contractors don’t notice,

they are going above and beyond to ensure it’s all flush, to keep tabs on the new footpath as it tempers.

4.

*Gargoyle*

He looks down that horrific snout at us from the plinth where he stoops on one corner of the roof.

With those pointed wings he oozes cockiness, keeps this part of town at his say so, more than aware of how much he has outlasted;

there’s his bloodcurdling snarl, the sinewy limbs and aggressive pose that all mean scram, don’t come back,
keep your distance,

and when it pours down
he'll dribble litres
of saliva freely
out of his fierce,
sharp toothed mouth.

Around the corner several more
sculpted abominations,
no different to him,
have every intention
of scaring you half to death.
Extension

The garage roof from where we would retrieve a lost ball or frisbee back in the day has been hidden by scaffolding and plastic sheets for the new extension now the planning permission’s been gained.

Bad weather, navigation, a collision, they’ve got nothing to do with it, yet all the mineral skinned lengths of roof felt that have been ripped off, beams and all, look battered as sails after a shipwreck.

On your head, calls the intrepid workman launching the half deflated flyaway into my path, but it lands in his skip just so, unable to accept the loss of its vantage point, been up here forever that, he goes.
Armada

As I’m about to go and break it in the corner shop,
to choose from scratchcards, stationery and newspapers,
junk food, or a volume on local history,
I flip over, in the middle of Portballintrae,
the crisp tenner to inspect its reverse side:
a depiction of the *Girona*, four sails
ballooning, the oars prime and parallel,
freeze framed on an open, unknown sea,
as it patrols what could have been called Spain,
or beats a disorganised retreat, a concerned
Sorley Boy looking on from ramparts because
he has second-guessed the nasty weather,
beacons set on high ground, blazing gorse.
Later that week it turns up again on the first floor
of the bunker that is Ulster Museum,
overcrowded and fleet and unanchored.
The drowned, a tangle of grey bodies
who kept appearing around the point, were stripped
of possessions then buried in the graveyard
at Dunluce, or turned to bones at Port na Spaniagh.
A team of Belgian divers got there before
anyone and hunted down the wreck, its leaking
account, canon, jewellery and religious tokens,
lapis lazuli, coins, a golden salamander,
and their tall stories of superstition, fear,
improbable travel and shared faith.
It’s the sort of thing that seems ready-made for
*The Economist*, as difficult to find
buried behind the legion of lads’ mags
and an onslaught of celebrity gossip.
When I sort the shrapnel
that falls out of my wallet, when I book
the Holyhead to Dublin crossing
on directferries.co.uk,
when a stranger’s child in Ryman
struggles to pronounce crayon,
when the boy racers raise the decibels
with Born Slippy, when someone
showed up hooded, oared and robed
to a halloween party last year, shouted
‘whoever you are come to our river in arms’,
when I saw the Thames
busy with punts on a walk with my ex,
when a hearse rounds the corner
followed by its cortège
of limos, when I clamber
into a black cab and the driver’s
metre says ‘fare’ as I make small talk
and give the final destination,
when I pick up any book
or see any film that announces ‘The End’.

Charon
Fire Drill

At the alarm’s rising screech
the waiting staff of twenty-somethings
kitted out head to toe in black

shimmy out unexpectedly
into the drizzle, they loll on the kerb
or lean against railings

taking the opportunity
for a stealthy smoke break,
to let loose

about their housemates’
bad habits, rate what’s newly released
at the cinema and consider

a shopping spree or big night out,
the damage they might inflict
on their overdrafts…

which all takes a back seat
when they get the nod to cut short
the gloss of the fire drill’s

quarter hour adjournment,
an impromptu recess they yield
for the open, following demeanour

of tables that need to be cleared
and cleared again,
to the chink or rattle of mug,

plate and cutlery,
the early shift’s tie-up
of demanding customers

and background music,
that draws these casual jobbers
back to coffee machine and till.
1.

I brought it in to the producer who was in Radio City and I went into that studio, which was the big studio – 8A. It was a gigantic studio, and I walked in and there was Orson Welles screaming his head off, and calling someone behind the glass window a goddamned liar and a cheat and a fake and a phoney…

He was flying…I just stood there transfixed, and all the actors (he had all his famous Mercury Theatre actors, some of the best actors in America at the time) were just standing there waiting for him to cool down. The director, a man called Homer, who weighed about three hundred and ten pounds… came out to quiet him down.

Next to Homer was sitting a Yale historian, who was the official historian for Cavalcade of America. He vetted all the scripts to make sure they were not inaccurate. Welles’s point was that they were dealing with something in Latin America and Welles’s grandfather had been Secretary of State, so he knew all about this situation. He said, ‘You have just whitewashed America here! We murdered a lot of people down there. It was the usual American imperialism, and I’m not going to do this!’…The historian was slightly pickled so Homer turned to me and said, ‘Can you write something for tomorrow night?’ I said, ‘Well, I’ve got this thing about Juarez…’ So Welles, who I had never met before and who I imagined would have to buy clothes in shops such as High and Mighty, as my own grandfather did and whose catalogue, addressed to him, still comes through the door even though he passed over ten years ago, picked it up and started to read it.

He said, ‘Hey, this sounds pretty good! Let’s do this!’

2.

Now this has been standing here for centuries. The premier work of man perhaps in the whole western world and it’s without signature: Chartres.
A celebration to god’s glory and to the dignity
of man. All that’s left most artists seem to feel these days,
is man. Naked, poor, forked, radish.

There aren’t any celebrations. Ours, the scientists
keep telling us, is a universe which is disposable.
You know it might be just this one anonymous

glory of all things, this rich stone forest,
this epic chant, this gaiety, this grand choiring shout
of affirmation, which we choose when all our cities

are dust, to stand intact, to mark where we have been,
to testify what we had it in us
to accomplish. Our works in stone, in paint, in print

are spared, some of them for a few decades,
or a millennium or two, but everything must
finally fall in war or wear away into

the ultimate and universal ash. The triumphs
and the frauds, the treasures and the fakes. A fact
of life. We’re going to die. ‘Be of good heart,’

cry the dead artists out of the living past.
Our songs will be silenced – but what of it? Go on singing.
Maybe a man’s name doesn’t matter all that much.
The Old Quarter

In the old quarter it all seems to happen
at once, woken up, undeniable again
with its shaded tree fringed plazas, boulevards
and steadfast attractions, the aroma
disorganized here: tourists, cigarettes,
vehicles, air conditioned shops. Traffic flows
into and causes another jam along Calle
de San Vincente, different, less strange than last
night’s when the barricades were up, the air taught

with brass and snares and the road closed, festooned
with flowers and stems for the parade’s giant
figures. We darted across then and now having
a last, protracted wander around, out to kill
time until our flight back to Manchester,
on the look out for a paper in english or
souvenirs, an internet café, somewhere else
to sit down with a coke or cortado. Monday
morning and the entire winding, hot, dusty,
laid-back, bustling area is like a terminal
where the buses all arrive at once, on cue and
itineraries collide; Valencia will get
along just fine on its own. The activists
(los indignados they are nicknamed) lie in tents
that are scattered around the main square
and nobody would like to predict them leaving
anytime soon. A busker who pounds pavements daily
with his sax takes one of his usual spots on

a busy corner. By pedestrian crossings
people get out of the sun and wait, they all seem
to sport Ray Bans. At the Sorolla Centro the girl
stuck behind reception is her same old smiley self,
the only one who can say exactly who might check
in or out. The waiter at Taberna de la
Reina II opens big umbrellas over streetside tables.
Will he be sad to see us go, count out the hours
till we leave and after, like the cocktail sticks left

over from a plate of pinxtos? So we prepare to
return to normality: deadlines, overcast skies,
the old quarter’s persisting face, statements and chores,
the swirl of places half-forgotten, half-remembered.
The summer sun will go down without us on the old
quarter, behind the grand post office, bullring
and the cathedral, bounce off smooth marble pavements,
hot to the touch, till it drifts further out of focus and all that’s left is to take a stab in the dark.
Lines on an Apparently Doomed Economy

The financial centres and double-dip recession, the available balance, a cold sweat over your APR, then the wolves at the door, the cave-in,

but this jargon can’t turn back the clock, the credit rating, or cut we, the loaned to the hilt, the debt saddled, or our plastic, some slack,

the only loophole that can be found offers up the glare off the sea, as Icarus crashes in a melee of wax and feathers,

no use to the talking head or analyst who try to make sense of graphs, bar charts and data which would say, with any grace, that a downturn is bliss.
Ovid in the Recession

How about the disposable collateral of clearance sales and the razor sharp acoustics inside vacant premises, the graffitied roller shutter and agent’s board, how about the technicalities and conditions of the bail out, the glacial pace of recovery, the travel itineraries turned paper planes and abandoned Amazon wishlists; or how about the suspended ambitions of the newly graduated, their inboxes of rejection, the talk of generation emigration and brain drain,

how about the laid off and retired, who make do and mend, stash odds and ends like doomsday preppers,

the technicalities and conditions of the breakup: one of us will keep the faith, the other keepsakes.
Jehovah’s Witnesses

On the doorstep, after work, I would have been doing the tidying up, changing a lightbulb, or about to eat, when they stop by for a friendly chat about destruction and salvation, God’s wondrous kingdom, armed with generic Q&As out of *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, and copies of *The Watchtower* or *Awake!* to hand out.

Dark as the cupboard under the stairs, no-nonsense, suited and booted with tidy haircuts and matching briefcases, they speak almost in tongues as they explain that, although essentially we hit the rocks in 1914, there’s always the opportunity to convert and, they say, to wait it out in hope of resurrection.
In the boot of the Ford
Granada they’ve got a sub-
machine gun, their packed lunch,
a book on equine behaviour,
pistols in the glove compartment.
The box rattles behind them.
When they arrive at the stud yard
one of the armed men
gets on with the uncoupling
while his friends,
all named Cresswell,
storm the house
and force the groom,
his family locked in the cellar,
to lead them to the stalls
where first he must help identify
and then load the prisoner.

Eight hours and a string
of phone calls later
police trawl the country’s farms,
turn over stables and outhouses,
they nearly fall for a ringer,
but the real deal evades them
after they have sifted through
all the horseshit, explored all avenues
of enquiry. A day or two after, a change
of tack, a diviner, another one
who does the tracing
has been called in and taken out
to the Curragh and surrounds,
where he awaits a sign or hopes
to contact his spirit guide and join
the dots between the colt,
our men Cresswell, the IRA
and this new Paris connection:
‘King Neptune’ is on the line
and wants to talk the talk, make demands,
to strike a deal with the Aga Khan.

That said, their getaway,
or for that matter
the decoy, would’ve hardly
stood out amongst the many
vehicles with boxes in tow
that criss-crossed
the N7 junction;
the fact is they picked
their moment, blended in
with the annual horse auctions
going on all over.
The whole gang parks up
in a muddy lay-by
not far from Glencar Waterfall
where I’ve gone to sightsee
and its white blaze ushers
me from one stolen child

to another ‘stolen child’
being roughhoused
the short distance
along a muddy track
from the trailer towards
an outlying stable
within earshot of the falls.
Now, the closest thing the
Creswells have to their own groom
made out the fracas,
headlights and an engine
turning over, the spooked
horse’s whinny and snort,
then a panicked
‘Whoa there, whoa’
and came skidding over
with a torch to guide them home,

then finished the job,
the cocked weapon at arms
length, like some poisonous plant,
when after a few days
the syndicate came up short,
wouldn’t negotiate
and Shergar took a turn
for the worse thus sealing
his own fate, which leaves the real
groom, limping back
towards town several miles out,
mystified, a nervous wreck,
with so many pieces
still unclear, apart from the stars
he could see around him,
and the whole goings on
one unsolved puzzle.
Umbrellas

'These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, and perfect in his generations.'

– Genesis 6:9

Truncheon style, jet black and solid
like something Pluck and MacCruiskeen
in _The Third Policeman_ might
have wielded when not arguing
the finer points of bicycles –

an unforeseen, preventative
measure, that came back with you
from Emory University
bookstore, made by Storm Duds,
and indebted to the Paragon

designed by Samuel Fox
in 1851, which had all the extras
you could need: u-shaped steel ribs,
brass tips and detailed
faux-ivory handles.

The skies opened like they do
in a monsoon season
and when the wind gusted
at the correct angle
the item acquired an unwieldy

and awkward demeanour,
indomitable in the carry
as something that bucked
or became uncentred. I'm sure
you’ve guessed it was a battle.

It helped you do the gentlemanly
thing once, when you lent it
to your ex. You would fear no evil
for that umbrella was with you,
your rod and your staff.

*

You lumped it in with stuff
used to separation: orange peel,
biros without caps, a pocket’s worth
of change, the emptied wine bottle
filled with dried flowers, a pile

of recalled library books,
the black leather satchel.
On tenterhooks, this tenuous bond.
That puts you in mind of another
one you lost on the 142 bus

from University to West Didsbury,
it was inevitable,
too good for you, but such is life,
all signs sneak up on you, though
the thing was streamlined

as a foil, and had this beautifully
satisfying push button action,
a proper brolly, a Fulton
that had served you well
until you got off

absent-mindedly outside
the Oxfam where under drama
the one time you called in,
you found a stack of Arthur Miller
and in the window there’s a framed
promotional poster
from *Singin’ in the Rain*.
Actually, Don Lockwood danced
around with a similar one,
and then spontaneous, considerate,

just gave it away
as if to bestow an artifact
or something sanctified
on that unsuspecting
but thankful man.

*

People spattered, shifted in ones and twos
like nobody’s business,
but you hoiked it up,
the lower clothes clinging (surface tension),
wielded that shield, that leviathan, no,

that ark, to the room where you teach.
Shaken off but still dripping, you hung
it on a spare coat hook, like a plumb-line,
accurately. You’ll freely admit that you’re one
to go in for a minute’s silence

when seeing one broken, shunned on the street,
or blown to kingdom come, ousted
from that which it thrives on.
You invoke for them the things they need,
the firm grip of businessman

and news reporter, to always have recoil.
Uncertainty. Picture rain pelting and bouncing
off the dome, its pitch nylon skin.
Then the way its shape lent itself perfectly
to being turned inside out,

as toiling with wind
and seminar materials, you crossed the road,
strode over one, of no use now
but obviously from good stock,
at the entrance to your building.
Ships are dozing on the Bosphorus, 
seduced by an unbroken tide-line. 
A Dervish shivers on the mezzanine 
of a crumbling apartment block and listens 
sleeplessly to public transport, car stereos, 
the cumulative noise of reincarnation. 
Clutching as the coarse stage falls away 
and sends me sprawling in my studio, 
I dream of museums and family portraits. 
A pendant of Westernised moonlight 
strays through clouded panes and into 
a cypress lined cemetery, 
delicately making for oblivion. 
Some result for the suicidal ex-girlfriend, 
her eyes reflected snowstorms and dried up fountains, 
my Great Grandfather who lost 
an eye in Gallipoli. His freshly flagrant socket 
mustered only the relic of an all-night battle. 
I am an expert on dead-end myth, frostbite, 
enforced barbarity and dressing wounds with bitumen. 
My erratic itinerary endorses 
acts of vandalism, taking into account 
a bread knife for hacking at the ensign. 
A long time since the last paradox scattered stones 
and stars. I have almost reached the point of speech. 
Retired heads of state reproach 
the appropriated voice that hates them anyway. 
The metropolis stares over cupolas, 
switching inflection on a Siberian wind. 
Patiently I have proved my love with words, 
roved avenues, while an old woman 
talked to herself in the infinite space 
of a sex cinema, about miniaturists, 
mannequins, barbers and Cadillacs. 
She has been forgotten like a childhood illness, 
a birth mark or phone call, 
and anchored beyond recognition. 
You could almost call it self-reflection, 
this banging of heads, this past in which the hüzün- 
filled God does or does not exist.
Sometimes on going upstairs to open or close the office curtains, one particular blackbird will show up from wherever he’s been hiding, (in a cramped thicket, that shadowy recess or crevice where the hedge meets the lawn), and sweep down onto the top of the tallest yew tree that’s as high as any house and in his favored garden, and grip – keen but at first unbalanced – the bouncy sprigs with its strong taut claws, flapping the glossy points of its wings to show off. Solid ochre, its beak opens and closes with a voice that chases after nobody or searches me out, though when I open the window and absorb myself with that directionless high-pitched instrument of perplexity and give it my best shot to decipher what is carried in it, or what it is at heart, it quiets down, dries up like puddles after rain. It’s like I’ve overheard a confidence it’d been meaning to keep on the sly, some unique grasp it has on the world, or uncovered a skeleton in its nest whereby it becomes painfully self-conscious, on pins because of an offense or nuisance I’ll make it accountable for, getting this into its head and into the ruffled plumage all over its body that there’s no conceivable way – even with all that a fleeting acknowledgement entails, a pause so as not to startle, how I cast my gaze over its jittery form and the bird interlopes on my leaving the house routine as I hover in the window – of us ever identifying with one another. ? it continues to act cagey, syncs a quick shake of his tail with such alertness of mind, turns his head as if brandishing two polished sequins, the beak again with which he wrests a deep red berry. This keeps us only seconds, two figures well versed in these tenuous, tentative moves for skirting around the issue: I try to second guess each shake of wing and feather, it shapes up as if to make scarce, then settles once more bemused, before I drop the doorkeys I’ve been holding, loudly berate myself and suddenly – startled and disconcerted – it unfastens itself from the yew tree, shoots off to the hedge, bombs into its preferred
section without so much as a look back,
as I pick up the keys and make
my way back downstairs unsure whether I am of
any significance to him, this unexpected
interruption and disappearance from
his existence that is all flight and feeling:
an awareness that he has company, not small
but by no means massive, intruding within
his field of vision, the sound of my dawdling
behind his tiny skull, the foreign blocks of colour
that are my jeans and cheque shirt, my cotton crest
or down, how the distorted light alters
with any movement, sudden or leisurely,
in the way morning or night touches down across
water, or my face that gauges and surveys
the landing place he frequents, envious
of the heights he so adeptly reaches – the
excited flutter of the confidence he tries
to hold onto during disturbances and bounds
with, full of himself and sunshine, between the
trees and pavilion roof, every tile
scintillating, regarding me as something that
obscures or clarifies, near fuchsias that hang
like earrings and act as a screen, his days full
of transformation and disjunction, after I let
myself out and go down to the greenhouse
with paper scraps and vegetable peelings
to throw on the compost heap chatting
on my mobile phone, the gurgle of schoolchildren –
carefree shouts and adolescent disputes – in the
background, until we vanish into the furtive
day, turn our backs on one another, give in
to those well known routes and routines.
N.B.

One of these days I will retrace my steps
to the cemetery, its ever present smog,
so many stony faced headstones
uniform and well informed, plot after plot,
to measure, to remind, to sadden, and statues
of beckoning angels or downcast women
in stone and marble. Pointless to read on,
to assume I would absorb any more,
they’d already started to slip my mind.
How many games of hide and seek, how often
did we have the run of that place?
The rest of the world was caught napping,
we jumped the high wall, hurtled past spades,
a ride-on mower, wads of artificial turf,
the rickety gardener’s hut where, behind a big
stack of blank stones just asking to be chiseled,
we found a stash of teenage contraband,
torn out pages of adult magazines, bottles
partially swigged, spirits because they keep,
and cigarettes waterproofed with a plastic bag,
put there in certainty of its safe keeping,
ever imagining it could be upturned.
Planter of ideas, overseer of reunion...
favourite underworld, in spite of your
vacant benches, you have stayed the course,
stayed dignified as we cut loose,
an unapproachable, indelible reference point.
The Rig

Not some offshore resource
to drill wells, not a trucker’s pride and joy,
and not even, in all honesty, the ideal place,
but somewhere to go clubbing

when you were around twenty, or twenty one.
I can picture girls dancing without their heels
or Converse in a circle, bags and coats
in the middle, lads and hipsters perfecting
stand-offish, don’t give a fuck slouches

by the hand dryers in the gents
into whatever was that month’s next big thing,
The White Stripes, The Strokes,
the something else,

as if they’d just played, or were in the photo
shoot for the album that broke them
and returned thousands of sales,
then sold out the tour,
or were just stuck to the dirty floor

although they’re kind of secure
in their degrees or part time jobs.
The room is hot, influenced by lights
and things seem to go slower.

*

More or less defeatist, the like
of which your tribe,
those dressed in armour,
would probably not approve,

the sort of endeavour
you’d have been steered
away from in Sunday school
if you could recall

that far back or had fully
paid attention,
and are therefore in two minds
going in for, like the most

you could relate
to were the influences
of your mother and father,
as they took from their own,

to keep a light within reach,
an inferred network busy.
Hold on. Doors at the club,
the queue goes round the corner.

*

Once, you got chatting with this bouncer
who professed to have knowledge of the occult.
He told of the group he attended
regularly every week

to learn about thelema and meditate,
a small but mixed bunch
who after would go to a nearby bar
to talk more over pints and roll ups.

You’d gone outside without a jacket
to sit in a doorway for a break
from the racket,
the heat and the smoke.

He told me this wasn’t his calling,
the sketchy hours and chucking out time fights
that, frankly, he should have turned
his back on years ago.

*

Back in the club the disc jockey’s
hard to see and raised like the speaker
at a podium, or a soldier on the turret
of a tank, where you spend some time as an eyewitness
to each crisis and incident of his patrol

into the one field of combat,
near the interchangeable camps, the fresh casualties.
The people queuing for the cloakroom
are pure fumbling and replay,
lost in a haunted wood.

You pass the bar as they kill the music
and the house lights come on.
I was waiting for my students
to come down from the air shard,
it was sunny but freezing up there
because of the very cold start to spring,
we’d just got done with the big picture show,
and before this plunged us into the dark

I’d told them to notice the use of timelines
and a straightforward chronology.
So I moved through to the exhibit on frontline
medicine. I was thinking it could prompt
a sequence around war, but also wanted
to continue to sate my fixation on terror.

Here was the inside story on prosthetics and triage,
the aftermath of your ambulance
hitting an IED, I viewed a time lapse
video installation, a field hospital,
the unusual movement of surgeons
and nurses in green scrubs, then flinched, paused,

emoted over stories of the mutilated
and damaged. By now our Wednesday afternoon
outing was almost over, a change from
the bog standard seminar; what more
could we really say about literature
and history, one’s individualistic,

the other nightmarish? Another week
of University Place and we might contract
an irreversible despair. The lift pinged
and delivered some of the troops. We’d been looking
out, for escape routes, to bridges over the water,
scullers darting under them and away.
Trick or Treaters

After dark they do a sweep of the mulchy
tree lined street, work its long drives in a zig-zag
from one end to the other. They shove
letterboxes, prod doorbells, bang garden gates shut.
The ones with all the lights off they’re tentative

about, they’ll come back after. Becoming more
forward with each door, there’s double trouble
for those who ignore them, impassive singles
and suspicious elderly couples, the threat
of their later return with eggs and toilet roll,
an offering of themed sweets, black and orange,
from the house where a family party
is in full swing. Any ordinary day
on the high street they’d be anonymous.
Without the getup and props they pile home

from school in uniform, backpacks
hang off them as they squabble boisterously,
seem to take over the whole street
without giving you a second look. It’s not
what it used to be, a couple of teenagers

probably too old for it, in bin bags
with plastic pitchforks; one has smeared his face
with his mother or sister’s foundation,
no pumpkins or enthusiasm and after
hard cash that they’ll share out in a vandalised

bus stop, then return to their run down estate
where noise carries abruptly
around high, cramped flats, that are good
for star gazers and as a vantage point to see
them with their friends letting off bangers and rockets.
The blackthorn by the aggregate yard, 
the bramble taking over a section 
of fence bars, the aster near the sign 
that warns of low and high tide. 
A pair of trainers slung over telephone 

wires; picture it, the sandwich board 
outside a café at the spot the road forks 
below the overgrown nature trail, 
the step-stone bridge that allowed water 
to talk, a line of rocks in the stream bed; 
Remember the sky lantern a day before 
yesterday, that sailed high over the picnic 
benches in a corner of Birch services; 

a betting slip that’s been thrown away 
swirling around a bookie’s podium, 
I’m conscious that all this is a shot 
in the dark, like that high flying, fiery 
dot that steals away into the open.
Ruin, Ireland

Whether intentional or obligated by the natural habitat, this lone unruly cottage keeps a constant vigil. Pieced together from washed out battens and encrusted stones –
(lichens, sea minerals, mossy rifts and furrows, snicks of plaster and exposed brickwork that compete with other signs of obvious wear and tear) – its drawing power, though nobody would ever call it this, lies in the fluctuation of order and disarray: despite everything – the wrinkles, bags under its eyes and screwed up features this seasoned professional is in the box seat for any mishmash of elements that the snarled islands of Clew Bay decide to throw at it, unsettling the reedbeds that have such short attention spans – coming across as eternally distracted, like petulant, oblivious children in a reflective library. Collapsed timber, different coloured sheets of tarpaulin, haphazard roof grass, corroded scaffolding for splints – the cottage occasionally lets go of things and lets slip, honing its life’s work as the strong silent type, as the parching, whitening sun turns it brittle, the barbaric showers inundate it, and all the wind does is pester in stops and starts. The sea level rises annually, so it’ll hang in the balance before its restoration by a property developer scouting the area for projects, or its recovery and rearranging into a dry stone wall that divides the field and gravel track, winding up not in its preferred form, but as cover for tired hikers and lost sheep, vital in times of tough luck and whichever element.
Millenium Bridge

And I will show you something different, from this vantage point on Millenium Bridge in mid-June, from either your shadow, or on a whim, with no proper schedule and route, I will show you both Bankside and St Paul’s and…where the hell are we? ‘Just an unreal city’ says the exchange student to her holidaying friend as they stop and use the helpful annotated panorama to single out central London’s notable buildings and incessant underneath us flows the rusty Thames, diesel that allows the human engine to tick over. Then, near Tate Modern, joggers who all listen to iPods. I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.
Leaf-Bagging

To scoop in one great surge, both arms outstretched and supple, and bag yourself a heap, bronzed, blackened, the sort that are good for compost and rack up around greenhouses, sheds or headstones, deep and crumply, like a worn out mattress, the deteriorated colourful weightless scraps of litter on the inside of each neat wind-sensitive pile all jumbled up with gravel, small change like vivid shrapnel – I remember leaf bagging. Yet some aspect of my make up changed after I cleaned away those bronze hillocks, or sunk my hands into the cool, tawny wetish drifts of the kerb: when the job for the most part was done, it seemed positively selfish to tie knots in those hefty black bin liners, to take them captive, to cut short their whizzing around and fetch them down the path to the back of the house, like I'd just interfered with this rare understanding, long established and of boundless consequence, after denying the unsuspecting molted world its sustenance, as if to find myself trying to reverse the fall, having thrown a human spanner in nature's works.
They haven’t even noticed, it just never registered,
the rambling allotment overlooking the motorway
that the building site began to encroach upon
near the end of last year, its paths and naked borders
scared stiff of diggers, girders, security fencing.
Here, on the edge, as they are going toe to toe,
a row of ashes, newcomers who I almost miss,
have been staked and guarded from this rubble
and the orbit of the hard shoulder.
Say, spring after next, they will grant a more pleasant
aspect to your window that the starlings
also appreciate, poised as they will be all hours,
surveying, collecting for their nests from
what used to be the allotment, twigs and bits
of metal hardware that ping the corrugated
roofs or bounce into the carriageway.
Lately I’ve been losing myself in the thought of flooring it on my own ride, a glossy Harley or a growling, classic BMW, when the motorway is all but empty, where I can take the exit that becomes a coast road, and residential areas cede to anonymous facilities and ports. So how would this work? Would I tag along with a gang involved in organised crime and live on borrowed time; maybe I’d drift around, take odd jobs at minimum wage for fuel; as a rule I’d scavenge, knock myself out in a chance orchard or meadow and get all excited by the supermarket after hours, jumpy when I caught a freegan off-guard. By the time we’d finished, we’d be pure energy coursing through the big wide world, that bike and I, pointed to where the heavens and farmland collide.
Retreat

Have I forgotten anything? I navigate, pull in through the gates, and greet my contact who offers Barry’s tea, expresses doubts over the recession and investment, points out the deserted site, as unique an issue as the marring of areas of natural beauty. So he fetches the key and I unpack my bags, go from room to room cracking all the windows. Then I plug devices in to charge; meanwhile air freshens. I shoot out to Spar for the papers, groceries and firelogs, the long way round, so I can amble down the pier and back. I try to plan what to do, what I’m doing about tomorrow, this breathing space – a future, grateful for the composed aspect – unreal. The garden backs onto the beach, the inky, motioning sea; the cottage and its nautical decor, the framed chart, lead line, model yacht, life-ring and oil lantern, a few small appliances, having grown used to their static solitariness, will allow themselves to be washed away, like the sensation of travel, right into the bay as soon as I go out properly for a day’s drive along scenic roads, through tidy towns. Roughly two years later I’m postponing the real work, this thesis, to view an illegal torrent and there it is, the cottage now the scene of a murder, Brendan Gleeson with his sardonic, casual attitude in character and on location to film The Guard, like an existential thinker who makes almost all of Louisburgh and the crew reassess their approach to experience.
A Note for Antoine Doinel in Paris

A month, two, give or take, it will be spring. So let’s see, same old same old; fed up with my self replenishing stack of marking, the bantery blathery chuggers who lie in wait at the back of the Royal Exchange; the students hang around on campus like they’ve just rocked up for fashion week, or a festival, only neither is on, united in artful dishevelment, skinny jeans with Vans or dress shoes, clothes that look like they’ve been slept in.

So what gives, Antoine? Fancy a run down the steps at Montmartre? Just hang on, for my sake, one second, we can go to see someone famous in Père Lachaise the city can be our playground, let’s raise hell, chain smoke roll ups and get wrecked on red wine, be each other’s wing man, plain make it up as we go along, even though we know it ends with oh well, and what next, and is this it?
It’s no joke for this tome, the book of Kells, stuck on the same ornate glittered pages. It lies idle in the glass case, as the darkened special exhibit inside Trinity College Library reveals to us its mysteries and origins, puts it on a pedestal once more. A flow of people admitted at intervals by the summer jobbing student at the turnstiles, please scan your ticket to enter, circle and try to find a space to see, or nudge through the huddle that’s easily three or four people deep. Somebody, in the early middle ages or today, didn’t quite think this through. I get lost in the mists, there is rustling, a voice recites. O monks, scribes, going to work at your abbey in Iona, in Lindisfarne or Meath, (who really knows), your centrepiece has in its spell international travellers dropping in on the off chance like me, large, brash Americans and over-tired children. Your treasure blazoned like a flag or logo across the vast badlands of the stone grey campus, getting up close and personal with the campanile’s frame, the quadrangle’s cobbles. After one tour of the book please make your way through to the next part of the exhibit. Other corners are less hectic, offering trivia and respite, until we shuffle out squinting and inevitably through the packed gift shop. And the items to which we pray: fridge magnets, stationery, apparel, posters and postcards, cd-roms, the dvd and blu-ray.
Sunny sparkling morning. They’ve fashioned a personal bargain bin that spills across the drive and front lawn. Belongings surplus to requirements have been arranged on folding tables and dust sheets to cover the fissured asphalt and lush turf that comprise those omnipresent flat expanses. A cardboard sign on a post, to let the stirring world know, has been driven into the ground and rattles in the breeze. A slimline bicycle, a racer, glints alongside an assortment of old clothes and an inflated paddling pool, sky-blue. Moved into the background a ceramic bird bath reclines, a radio telescope that listens in on their universe. Telephone wires blather with thrushes and magpies – acute wings and tuneful snappy beaks in action like never before. A wisp of bluish hued fumes are expelled from a car exhaust, the air turns impulsively solvent and chemical, petrol. At the forefront of all this, seemingly touching a splashy sky, an impulsive early flurry of white blossoms and alabaster reels around, fast as they can and immaterial as celebratory confetti. Taking this in from across the road under a friend’s porch, I catch sight of a woman in a body warmer who is taken aback by the skittish petals, stoops to prevent a selection of art prints being blown off by dampening their spirits with books; her friend unrolls a rug, so that an easy floe – its patterned sheet – is unveiled, advances. A teenage boy manhandles a green hosepipe and fires an immutable coiled silver jet of water into the waiting pool. A man unearths from a box handful after handful of weird bric-a-brac and knickknacks: exhibited, the dull tubers and snazzy root vegetables seem confused. All four standby, survey, ready for action. I notice the brown haired woman with the body warmer get caught off guard by the mischievous petals then laugh when they stick; the man who harvests bric-a-brac go back inside the garage, nose around speculatively, and after a resolute clap of his hands kick aside some debris with disinterest. Such an episode this is, beneath the sky and the cover of trees, transfigured by the breeze and daylight, making its point of being nothing out of the ordinary. This is a picture of the restful life: their yard sale, making light of
things as they sort, clean out and strip back,  
shiver a little in the late spring temperature,  
a move away or maybe spaciousness in their de- 
cluttered thoughts. Bright and early they join forces,  
delegate, in fleeting equilibrium in  
the neither here nor there, such and such day, before  
they turn to their nominated jobs and allotted  
places as if to forget themselves, both onlookers  
and partakers in the world’s known, veering  
atmospherics – fallen twigs and dust swirls.  
Eyecatching, unmistaken, the diverse array  
of trappings they kept secret for so long  
is an open book and its soul made obvious;  
so they confer and swap, acquiesce and call the shots.
Recreation, I get plenty, so much in fact
that I’ve plain lost track.

The most recent foray
ended up with my being reported
for breach of the peace.

One of my neighbours
has a nice sideline in weed and powder.

Occasionally, if the mood strikes, I’ll boost a car,
I’m an avid reader of *GQ*, *the TLS*,
*National Geographic* and *Autotrader*;

my last set of wheels, a Cortina
took one epic trip to the bottom of a river.

Really, I’m a bit of a restless soul.
One weekend, outside Dun Laoghaire
terminal, at the end of a messy bar crawl,

some random blokes asked me if I’d be up
for transporting their car-load of fertiliser.

I brought it back, no questions, on the express ferry.
An evening’s poaching – deer, livestock, rabbit,
game, fair game that is, when it’s whatever

you can lay hands on,
led to some nosy parker

taking a beating with the stock end of my twelve gauge,
then a high speed chase which ended only
when I rammed the gamekeeper’s 4x4,

so he ended up as part of my hedge fund,
which has never even seen the markets

but *is* buried as installments
beneath various privets and hawthorns
like a glistening, thorny system:

this Protestant or Catholic I jacked and taunted
coming out the all night store,
a photo of his wife and the driving license stripped from his wallet, and as for his wrist: relieved of the watch he bought after that last pay rise.

A curfew across the estate because of a spate of copycats and a curfew for me when I got off with probation. Really it’s all fun and games. A definite betting man, there’s this scam I invented that a group of us have going on the horses, so we’re always in and out of the bookies. A friend of a friend who runs a farm shop near Oxford has an interest in crop circles, and can put paid to those theories about freak weather or extraterrestrials, he took me out to stamp down a barley field, we hid in an old silo when the police came. I also run with this crowd who were two years above me in school, we’ve got a sizeable sum in a job lot of counterfeit whisky, vodka and rum. In my childhood I’d hike in the woods as often as I could, set small fires with this lighter I’d stolen and foil packs of Panini stickers. Or at home I’d pretend sofa forts were igloos. I revered Nanook of the North and played to death a copy of Flaherty’s film taped from tv. My favourite scene: where he appears to pull his whole family and a husky from one kayak. When he harpooned then fought that seal through the ice it made me think of the coast at Murlough. My father and mother tell me I was a fairly quiet, unassuming boy, did well in school, never truanted or played up. I didn’t really
recover from the split with my childhood sweetheart.

She’s got a degree now, and a career.
On the best nights in the summer after sixth form,

we’d climb this hill from where you could see the next county
and she’d speak about foreign films and the books
on her university reading list,

we’d swig wine from the bottle.
As for now, I take my first shower in days,

brought round by the kick of hot water and lather,
air conduct to Mozart’s symphony
twenty-five in the cubicle,

cleansed of my self-made *sturm und drang*,
curse at the steam as I open the glass door to find

a cursory footing, but I’m pretending
I’m someone I’m not, being highly
articulate, more cultured than I’ll ever let on,

appreciative of things like verse,
the beaux arts and belles-lettres, just not very holy.
Volume II of II

FAST ENOUGH: POEMS

AND

PLACES WHERE A THOUGHT MIGHT GROW:
CULTURE, LIMINALITY AND THE TROUBLES IN
DEREK MAHON’S LIVES (1972) AND THE SNOW
PARTY (1975)

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of
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in the Faculty of Humanities

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SIMON HAWORTH

SCHOOL OF ARTS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES
Volume II: Places Where a Thought Might Grow: Culture, Liminality and the Troubles in Derek Mahon’s Lives (1972) and The Snow Party (1975)

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Introduction

In this thesis I will examine the relationship between the poetry published by Derek Mahon in his second and third books, Lives (1972)1 and The Snow Party (1975)2 and the overwhelming cultural contingency of that period, namely the Northern Irish Troubles. The central argument of this thesis is that Mahon’s poems in these collections deliberately use liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas to refute the cultural ideas that led to totalitarian positions and the fixity of religious and political idealism which were at the heart of the Troubles. The poems offer an independent and unrestricted alternative to these but are also imbued with a sceptical irony that is aware of the impossibility of the ideas they propose. In short, they trouble the Troubles. I have divided this introduction into three sections. In section one, ‘Protestant Origins and Early Poetic Development’, I will outline Mahon’s alienation and liminal disaffection from his religious and cultural background. In section two, what I will call ‘Understanding Liminality’, I will lay out some definitions of liminality important to our understanding of the poetry Mahon produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Finally in section three, which I have titled ‘Beckett & MacNeice: Literary Paradigms’, I will look at the influence of Samuel Beckett and Louis MacNeice on Mahon’s poetry during these years. To do this I will explain how Beckett and MacNeice display the same properties of alienation and disaffection from their Irish Protestant origins as Mahon.3

In the following chapters on Lives and The Snow Party I am going to provide close readings of significant poems (briefly mentioning them here first in relation to certain ideas about liminality) from each collection and consider these poems as imaginative engagements with the Troubles using a filter of liminality, interstitiality and peripherality, not just in a spatial sense but also a temporal and intellectual one. Mahon deliberately uses liminal ideas, spaces and an ironic disposition to attack and interrogate what he sees

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1 Derek Mahon, 1972, Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press). The poems I have chosen from this volume are as follows: ‘An Image from Beckett’ (p. 8), ‘Lives’ (p. 14), ‘Rage for Order’ (p. 22) and ‘Entropy’ (p. 30).
2 Derek Mahon, 1975, The Snow Party (Oxford: Oxford University Press). The poems I have chosen from this volume are as follows: ‘Afterlives’ (p. 1), ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ (p. 9), ‘A Hermit’ (p. 26), ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ (p. 27) and ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ (p. 36).
3 For clarity I should define the Troubles here as an ideological, religious and political conflict that broke out between Unionist Protestants and Republican Catholics in Northern Ireland in 1969 and continued in its most violent form until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The original trigger for this violence had been discrimination against the Catholic nationalist minority by the Protestant Unionist majority; but the larger cause was Northern Ireland’s contested status within the United Kingdom.
as the fascistic and fetishistic attachment to and deference to such communal and cultural ideas during the Troubles. This is achieved through a disparate range of subject matter, places, speakers and influences at work in the imagined spaces of the poems. In Mahon’s poetry these things are typified by liminal ideas and themes, meaning that they are either interstitial and in-between, or peripheral in nature. Homi K. Bhabha has referred to ‘a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated’. Mahon’s poems also turn to such spaces and use an approach that tells us strict obedience to religious and political beliefs assigned at birth need not be a determinative factor, or prerequisite, for the individual living under a particular set of cultural circumstances. Thus, the poems under discussion here reject the borders imposed on individuals by religious and cultural fixity.

Fintan O’Toole states that ‘the central fact of that [Irish] culture is that it has no borders’ and Mahon’s poems bear this out by reacting to fixed definitions of culture and territorialism with flux, ambiguity and liminality. These early poems are also mindful of the fact that nationalism and cultural tyranny spread outside their original generative ground. This is to say, Mahon uses liminality to challenge and rebel against the cultural, religious and political divisions that were re-opened during the Troubles. By deliberately exercising interstitial and peripheral themes, Mahon’s poetry expresses a vigilance designed to prevent the reappropriation of the intellectual and creative space by hegemony and politically and religiously exclusive rhetoric. In the poems we can also sense an existential agitation brought about by such static cultural beliefs. In some poems, such as ‘An Image from Beckett’ and ‘Entropy’ this is desolate and in others, such as ‘Lives’, excited and quickening. This feeling originates in the same place as Frank Wright’s assertion about the Troubles that ‘Many who have looked at the political situation in Northern Ireland have suggested that it is hopeless.’ If it is hopeless then it does not necessarily follow that Mahon’s poetry of this period is too. In fact, as I will argue here, Mahon’s deliberate and positive embrace of the liminal, at a time when Northern Ireland had entered into its darkest and most disturbing phase of political violence, a time when many felt only angst and negativity, is often anticipant of a better time. However this is a sceptical, deeply ironic poetry aware of the ultimate futility and absurdity of its own propositions of resistance. The poems display a Wittgensteinian

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sense of uncertainty in their attitude to their own ideas and the idea-based currency of Northern Irish culture, relating to the statement that ‘the truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements.’ However, liminality forms part of a continuous strategy in which Mahon is vigilant to prevent tyrannous cultural ideologies occupying the poetic space in the way that they overwhelmed the real world during the Troubles.

1. Protestant Origins and Early Poetic Development

Derek Mahon was born into a working-class Protestant family in suburban Belfast in November, 1941. He has spoken of his childhood experience of belonging to this particular communal group within Belfast (and also more widely in Northern Ireland), particularly his vivid memories of his time as a choirboy and the formal qualities of the hymns that Mahon states he sometimes has in mind when writing his poems. This personal testimony illustrates the continuing influence of his religious upbringing, despite his avowedly post-religious persona. Although his formative years were spent during a relatively peaceful period in Northern Ireland’s history (despite continued efforts by the IRA to provoke a wider conflict designed to liberate Northern Ireland from British rule, through small scale attacks such as the Northern Campaign of 1942-1944 and the Border Campaign of 1956-1962) Lives and The Snow Party articulate a disaffection and alienation from his hymn-singing heritage as an Ulster Protestant. This was sparked by his encountering new and different kinds of literature as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin and exacerbated by the start of the Troubles in the late 1960s. In 1969 he had just returned to Ireland from a period of travelling in North America. So, this shockingly violent and transitional period, played out by Northern Ireland’s religious, political and cultural groups, was an undoubted catalyst for the schism in Mahon’s relationship with his Protestant community. What is evident in both these collections is the depth and extent of the breach between Mahon and the Unionist Protestantism of his childhood that leads to an interrogative, often paradoxical, dialogue in these poems between negative and reductive religious, political and cultural ideas and Mahon’s deliberate

incorporation of liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas as positive, individualistic influences.

Eamon Grennan⁹ makes a familiar point that Mahon’s poems, through speech-acts that are manifestations of the self, assert their freedom from history. He also mentions their ‘emblematic silence’ and ‘spare intensity’¹⁰. These qualities must be weighed against the obvious noise and detritus in Mahon’s poems that represent the other side of this quandary. The poems in Lives and The Snow Party correspond to both sides of this and are not restricted or anchored to either one.¹¹ Community is a fundamental idea in Mahon’s resistance to cultural fixity since his poems present a sustained and direct challenge to the religious, political and cultural attitudes of the Troubles. He will not allow these attitudes to stand for him, rebelling against originary culture and offering alternate approaches to this time. This feeling derives from Mahon’s estrangement from his Protestant forebears. Within the poems Mahon’s reimagining of the Troubles results in an alternative community based upon liminal principles where he confronts issues of selfhood and individuality and actual political and religious issues intrude.

However, it is too simple to say that Mahon’s exploration of liminal ideas blanks out his Protestant background entirely. Rather, these poems stem from a post-religious sensibility that clearly remembers the imposed borders and limitations of religious, political and cultural ideologies, that responds by incorporating the tropes of liminality, interstitiality and peripherality to counteract their stultifying influence. Another vital aspect of these poems is the use and integration of existential, apocalyptic, post-colonial and post-national ideas as a way to counteract and challenge tribal fixations and communal enmities. The upheaval of the Troubles exacerbated a pre-existing scepticism and wariness towards such immobile cultural beliefs in Mahon’s thinking. In Lives this is powerfully apparent in the poem ‘Ecclesiastes’ which is at once sarcastic, ironic, angry, bitter and despairing. The poem is a description of a Protestant preacher or perhaps a Unionist or loyalist politician forcefully addressing a housing estate from a street corner and captured in full flow. In the opening lines ‘God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God- / chosen purist little puritan that, / for all your wiles and smiles, you are

⁹ Eamon Grennan, 1999, Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century (Omaha: Creighton University Press). I refer here to an essay entitled ““To the Point of Speech”: The Poetry of Derek Mahon”.
¹⁰ Ibid. p. 262-263
¹¹ Ibid. pp. 271-272. ‘[…] his poems make that offering of the self that is true speech, that enter into genuine relationship with an object and with an audience of fellow-creatures who become, in their listening, a community.’
(the / dark churches, the empty streets, / the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and / shelter your cold heart from the / heat of the world',\textsuperscript{12} it is impossible not to read Mahon’s dread, alienation from and disaffection for Protestantism, its ‘bleak afflatus’. It is also possible to sense their clear indictment and denunciation of myopic Puritanism, through an accusational tone. Also apparent here is the influential pull of the originary identity, religious zealotism and tribalism (‘God, you could grow to love it,’), particularly the way that this can have a warping or perverse effect on the individual’s experience within his or her sphere of influence. The poem also warns of the pitfalls in the fatalistic acceptance of one God (God- / chosen purist little puritan), using repetition of religious nouns to hammer the point and highlight its aversion to religious indoctrination.

This aversion to an inherited Protestantism is apparent from the earliest point in Mahon’s published work. In his monograph, \textit{The Poetry of Derek Mahon} (2007),\textsuperscript{13} Hugh Haughton states that ‘The poetry Mahon wrote on returning to Ireland, however, reflected more consciously on the culture of the North than anything earlier.’\textsuperscript{14} Firstly I must disagree strongly with this idea due to the fact that ‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’ addresses Mahon’s Protestant disenfranchisement in Northern Ireland as well as his indebtedness to MacNeice. Secondly, although Haughton goes on to identify such ideas and themes as existentialism, modernity, and Mahon’s varied and jumbled approach to history, time and place, these issue have to be contained within a unified, overarching structure, that is by liminal ideas and his poetry’s accompanying sense of interstitiality and peripherality. These poems are just as focused on ideas beyond Northern Ireland as those created within the province.

Another issue with Haughton’s study is his establishing of a major stylistic break or change in Mahon’s poetry with the publication of \textit{The Yaddo Letter} (1992) and \textit{The Hudson Letter} (1995).\textsuperscript{15} Many other critics have also observed this shift into a verse-letter style. What I want to suggest is that, whilst this is an important and distinguishable change of tack, it is not the first and only significant breach in Mahon’s style. \textit{Lives} and \textit{The Snow Party} should be seen as a pair, aesthetic companions, and part of the same project using liminality, interstitiality and peripherality, as well as an existential filter, to contend with the aggressive cultural fixity that appeared in Northern Ireland of the late 1960s and early

\textsuperscript{12} Mahon, 1972, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{15} Haughton, 2007, pp. 219-264.
1970s. These volumes form a self-contained fissure sandwiched by the collections *Night-Crossing* and *The Hunt by Night* (1982).

One of the immediate pressures that the Troubles placed on the emerging younger generation of Northern Irish poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the demand from some quarters that they serve as spokespersons for the ‘tribe’. Both Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley have written about the inherent dangers in producing poetry at this time, the latter referring to the ‘temptation to hitch a ride on yesterday’s headlines and write [...] the poetry of the latest atrocity’. \(^\text{16}\) Mahon too was subjected to these pressures and Longley speaks of walks he and Mahon took through ‘the wreckage of the Falls Road’; \(^\text{17}\) Mahon’s response, however, is to reject these supposed tribal responsibilities by turning to liminal, interstitial and peripheral space and ideas. These are informed by a heightened existential awareness of the destruction, violence and change occurring in Northern Ireland. John Goodby describes this period stating that the Northern Irish government ‘lost control of its territory’ and how writers ‘given a “bardic” tradition and the centrality of literature to Nationalist discourse, seemed natural choices as spokesmen for “their” communities, intimate with yet detached from the immediacies of the hatreds of their “people”.’ \(^\text{18}\) It is precisely this role that Mahon seeks to avoid through a rejection of the cultural role and the accompanying beliefs his ‘tribe’ would expect him to assume.

This movement from the central cultural arena into the interstices and the peripheries – intellectual as much as spatial – and the adoption of a liminal stance is complicated by Mahon’s editing of *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972) which was a culturally centralised undertaking. Anthologies have a tendency to be viewed as attempts to capture something of the general cultural and literary zeitgeist, even if the editor does not mean to deliberately do so. Mahon’s inclusion of his own poems with those of Heaney, Longley and Paul Muldoon, alongside such influential and culturally symbolic poets as W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Samuel Beckett and Louis MacNeice would imply that he views himself under those centralising terms. In the introduction to this anthology, published in the same year as *Lives* and three years before *The Snow Party*, Mahon states that ‘Whatever we mean by “the Irish situation”, the shipyards of Belfast are no less a part

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\(^{17}\) Ibid.

of it than a country town in the Gaeltacht.”¹⁹ This politically loaded statement demonstrates how the dilemma over cultural and religious allegiance had once again come to figure prominently in Irish society. Perhaps Mahon means his poems, through their liminality, interstitiality and peripherality, to be a disruptive, subversive and rebellious addition to this anthology of significant, central Irish and Northern Irish poets, and to the ongoing debate concerning Irishness in the light of the Troubles. Certainly, he wished to expand and even explode the narrow tribalistic terms within which notions of Irishness were subscribed by accentuating the pluralities of Irish history and culture.

The Troubles occupy Mahon’s imagination, but he is also interested in approaching Irishness and cultural identity through a more inclusive lens. His poetry in both *Lives* and *The Snow Party* is geared towards a pluralistic rendering of Irishness, where the exclusivity of the Troubles and its closed off cultural and communal groups is faced down by liminal, interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas about selfhood, identity and culture. The fixed cultural beliefs that contribute to sectarianism are challenged by Mahon’s advocacy of secular plurality, openness and receptiveness, rather than cultural conditioning based on fixity, limitations and confinement.

Derek Mahon’s early poems appeared in his school magazine at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (Inst) and then in Trinity College, Dublin’s literary magazine *Icarus*.²⁰ Following his graduation from Trinity College in 1965, Mahon departed for North America and eventually published a pamphlet of poems entitled *Twelve Poems* (1965). A first full collection of poetry followed, *Night Crossing* (1966). Returning to Ireland following these travels Mahon found himself emerging at the same time as three other major figures in Northern Irish poetry, his friend from Inst and Trinity College, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney and the younger Paul Muldoon, who despite a small age gap we can still consider to be part of this ‘uncanny cluster of new voices in Irish poetry’,²¹ as Hugh Haughton refers to it. These poets are sometimes considered major figures in ‘The Belfast Group’, the name given to Philip Hobsbaum’s poetry workshops that began in Belfast in 1963. David Wheatley in a recent review of Mahon states that

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²¹ Haughton, 2007, pp. 1-56. The first two chapters of Haughton’s work cover the early part of Mahon’s life and poetic career.
‘Within any generation of writers, not least one as close as the Belfast poets of the 60s, there will be tensions between group solidarity and self-assertion, and flashes of status anxiety […].’\(^\text{22}\) For Mahon the main source of status anxiety came through his relationship with the political, religious and cultural tensions during the Troubles, rather than in comparison or differentiation from other poets.

Despite his editing the *Sphere* anthology, aesthetic and artistic collaboration or fealty was not high on Mahon’s agenda as he sought to navigate the cultural storm of the Troubles. Only one poem I discuss here mentions another Northern Irish writer, the dedication to the poet James Simmons in ‘Afterlives’. Elsewhere, Heather Clark has argued for the centrality of ‘The Belfast Group’ in all of their careers stating that ‘cooperative and collaborative processes that Heaney, Longley Mahon and Muldoon engaged in […] were essential to their autonomous development.’\(^\text{23}\) In interviews Mahon has famously downplayed his participation in these workshops saying, ‘I was not a member of Philip Hobsbaum’s fucking Belfast group.’\(^\text{24}\) This positioning is another useful example of Mahon’s deliberately liminal detachment from any kind of cultural or communal grouping during the Troubles, or indeed since. Furthermore, in his introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* Mahon refers to ‘the Northern poets – Protestant products of an English educational system with little or no knowledge of the Irish language and an inherited duality of cultural reference.’\(^\text{25}\) There is no mention of ‘The Belfast Group’, but Mahon’s acknowledgement of ‘inherited duality’ provides an insight into his own thoughts towards poetic activity at the time. Mahon’s conscience seems to be caught between the paradoxical but parallel insistences of two separate strands of cultural belief and fidelity. The intensity of this ideological pressure from both sides results in him making the radical, resistant and subversive aesthetic decision to distance himself from these by refusing to accept the closed off, stymieing cultures of the Troubles as the only intellectual and imaginative recourse. Again, this issues from Mahon’s complex and charged relationship to his Protestant Unionist heritage. In response to the Troubles Seamus Heaney stated that ‘the problem of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for

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images and symbols adequate to our predicament'.²⁶ Like Heaney, Mahon's poetry at this
time set about its own search for adequate symbols, although its eventual route into the
liminal, the peripheral, the interstitial and the existential, is vastly different to the
direction taken by his contemporary.

Peter McDonald's reductivist reading of Protestantism in Northern Irish poetry²⁷ is
patently not the case when considering the idea of liminality in Mahon's poetry as an
alternative to Protestant inheritance and the Troubles. The intentional use of interstitial,
peripheral and existential themes by Mahon is part of a problematising of his cultural
background and the communal division of this era. Such ideas actually complicate our
interpretation of these poems since they bring into focus inconsistent subjects, speakers
and places that are wildly tangential, and where the relationship, or logic, demands
intellectual engagement and close scrutiny. Mahon is also interested in challenging the
reductive nature of Protestantism through permissiveness and free-thinking. McDonald’s
argument at first seems to dismiss Protestantism as a valid way of thinking about
Northern Irish poetry and therefore Mahon, but he goes on to contradict himself by
stating later that ‘at the level of style […] all three poets inherited and worked through
modes of expression and thinking that came distinctively from a ‘Protestant’ literary
tradition’,²⁸ and then saying ‘That habit of self-challenge is inherited from dissenting
Protestantism.’²⁹ Mahon's liminal ideas and his contesting Protestantism through
interstitial, peripheral and existential modes of thought and innovative, new ways of
approaching the dilemma of Northern Irishness are a form of ‘self-challenge’. But the
imaginative spaces of the poems work in a wider sense by strongly remonstrating against
cultural fixity and provoking different ways of thinking about the communal and cultural
complexities specific to Lives and The Snow Party. This mode of thinking stands in
contrast to John Hewitt’s position as ‘a lone prophet of regionalism’³⁰ and his

‘Protestant’ label, however, has often lain more readily to hand, and it has permitted critics to identify aspects in Northern Irish culture to which poetry offers an alternative […] Nevertheless it is a
simplification, and one which can encourage a wider – and maybe more damaging – kind of inaccuracy in the reception of Northern Irish poetry.’
²⁸ Ibid. p. 480.
²⁹ Ibid. p. 486.
³⁰ Sarah Ferris, 2002, Poet John Hewitt (1907-1987) and Criticism of Northern Irish Protestant Writing (Lewiston,
exploration, or exploitation, of an Ulster identity. It is also opposed to Tom Paulin’s ‘polemical verse’ with its overtly political themes.

2. Understanding Liminality

The main argument in this thesis will be that Mahon’s poem-spaces in *Lives* and *The Snow Party*, heavily influenced by the outbreak of the Troubles, continually, deliberately and strategically seek out and explore liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas as a means of building an artistic, intellectual and philosophical counterweight to the exclusivist, and ultimately lethal, zero-sum politics of Northern Ireland. Mahon’s poems espouse the positive value of liminal ideas and themes in relation to the negative, destructive and detrimental effects of the Troubles. But what do I mean by poem-space, a liminal space, or just space itself and how does this terminology relate to Mahon’s poetry? Yi-Fu Tuan states that ‘the meaning of space often merges with that of place. “Space” is more abstract than “place”. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it’. It is through the impersonality and abstraction provided by space that Mahon expresses an alienation and anxiety from his tribal origins, space allows for this. Place is allowed to intrude upon this through acts of naming, but the space itself remains in a state of existential neutrality; Mahon’s poems at this time do not employ typical settings, focusing instead on existential, peripheral, interstitial and most of all liminal ideas in dealing with the cultural dilemma posed by the Troubles. As Tuan argues, familiarity with space creates and formulates place, so following this, as the reader becomes familiar with *Lives* and *The Snow Party* they should expect some sense of this to develop. What happens instead, because of the poems’ liminality and inherent wariness towards the political and cultural conditioning, or compromise, that must happen when space becomes place, is that at their core are marginal and interstitial ideas, subjects and locations in-between and on the edge. I will now explain this by giving some definitions of liminality.

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines liminality as ‘Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process’.\(^{33}\) Threshold itself is listed as ‘an obstacle or stumbling block’, and can also mean, ‘To alter (an image) by reproducing it in two tones only, each part being dark or light’.\(^{34}\) The Troubles and the associated problematic of cultural fixity and tribal expectations are the obstacle that these poems negotiate. They also respond to both darkness and light and this can be sensed through Mahon’s sensitivity to the darkness of the Troubles. Liminal, interstitial and peripheral ideas and an expanded cultural range and extended frame of reference are all stimuli for Mahon’s poems. All these poems showcase a receptivity to and acceptance of innovative liminal ideas and themes. These are the terms through which Mahon negotiates the Troubles. I propose that through turning to liminal, peripheral, interstitial and existential ideas and sites, *Lives* and *The Snow Party* represent a new phase in Mahon’s career, a ‘stage’ where he develops a radical and unique thematic and formal approach.

Stan Smith’s essay ‘The Twilight of the Cities: Derek Mahon’s Dark Cinema’\(^{35}\) can be linked to the liminal as being two toned, both dark and light, on a threshold. For Smith ‘the play of light and dark seems to be at the heart of Mahon’s poetic project’.\(^{36}\) This argument revolves around several binaries, also referring to Beckett’s influence, noting the ‘multiply interstitial location (between winter and spring, dark and light, earth and air, rural and urban)’.\(^{37}\) Certainly, this fluctuation or disparity is a central issue for this thesis, the darkness of the Troubles and ideological totalitarianism is ironically counteracted and repelled by the lightness of liminality, the nimble way the poems negotiate the subjects, places and influences Mahon utilises. The flicker of interstitial places and subjects are only a temporary escape from the heavy, blinding mass of history and culture.

Another definition of liminality that I wish to argue is of central importance to Mahon’s poetry has been put forward by the anthropologist Victor Turner. For Turner the liminal


\(^{36}\) Ibid. p. 165.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. p. 167. Smith writes this about Mahon’s short sequence ‘Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc’ from *Night-Crossing* (p. 17) where one poem, ‘Molloy Dies’, is named after Beckett’s novel; but it applies to the most blatantly Beckett influenced poem in *Lives*, ‘An Image from Beckett’, as well as these kinds of binary found in the other poems I discuss in this thesis.
also appertains to the threshold, but also to transition, where liminality means to be in-between positions and on the edge, or in the margins of things. Turner bases some of his definition on Arnold Van Gennep’s perception of *rites de passage*,

\[\ldots\] all rites of passage are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both. During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject, (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.

Mahon’s poetry strategically detaches itself from social structures in order to interrogate the terms of his inherited sense of belonging. These poems continually and deliberately question and refuse to endorse the accepted and expected cornerstones of tribal or group identity. Yet these same fundamental provincial issues often necessarily feed back into the poems. As an Ulster Protestant, Mahon might be expected to display an allegiance to Unionism and Britain. Instead, a strategic liminality allows him to use the imaginative space of the poems to demonstrate his questioning rejection of the particular forms of political ideology and systems of religious belief that underpinned his own and his community’s sense of identity. This artistic and intellectual exploitation of liminal, peripheral, interstitial and existential ideas, coupled with ironic scepticism, is a ‘symbolic behaviour’ deliberately designed to separate and differentiate Mahon from his Protestant community and the fixed cultural beliefs associated with that. Instead of absolutes Mahon’s poems involve themselves with a premeditated and strategic ambiguity towards cultural and communal beliefs and ties. Unlike such publications as *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* and *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, Mahon refuses to be a ‘passenger’ of sectarianism; instead, in these poems, he becomes a ‘passenger’ as defined by liminality, outside the grip of cultural attachment and conditioning, where the attributes of his Unionist Protestantism are shed and counteracted by a humanistic tolerance and cultural open-mindedness. Importantly, these sentiments are constantly undermined by the poems’ dark, paradoxical ironies.

What this aesthetic practice allows Mahon to do is embrace an expanded imaginative range in his approach to concepts such as subject matter and place to articulate this intellectual and artistically positive refutation of Northern Ireland’s negative politics and religion. We might bear in mind Homi K. Bhabha’s reminder of:

the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation.40

This newness and innovation points us towards unfamiliar concepts in the context of Northern Irish culture such as existentialism, modernism and particularly postmodernism. Mahon’s postmodern tendencies are visible through the mobility of his speakers, their particular interest in detritus and rubbish and his poems’ anti-teleological collapsing of grand narratives, the ‘fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before’ that Jean Francois Lyotard considers.41 His poems, under the terms of postmodernism, pursue the unknown by breaking away from established forms. Hugh Haughton mentions Mahon’s ‘unique respect for obsolete modernity through the lens of Michael Thompson, whose Rubbish Theory offered an account of the changing status of mass-produced goods […] in a cycle in which they start and end as valued aesthetic objects but pass through a stage of being junk.’42 It is important to keep in mind that this junk characterises Mahon’s use of liminal, interstitial, peripheral and interstitial locales. But within both Lives and The Snow Party different ideas and subject matter work together; often, ordinary subject matter – objects, places, historical information, nature – takes special precedence in the poems and issues from liminal spaces to disrupt the central communal space where traditional culture is sustained.

Continuing to think about the liminality produced in Mahon’s poems we should not overlook the post-colonial dimension raised by Bhabha’s statement. The mutable and changeable characteristics of place, subject matter, influence and form within the poems, the potential and kinetic energy driving them towards what they might be and where they might go, are in conflict with the traditional cultural and tribal centers during the

Troubles that want to restrict them. Mahon follows the example here of Beckett and MacNeice, both writers who were perturbed by political, religious and cultural developments in their own time. This creates friction and a sense of disenfranchisement around borders and boundaries where both ideologically informed culture and the poet’s desire to resist such restrictive cultural definitions find themselves endlessly poised in-between the two, as Colin Graham states:

The liminal status of Ireland means that the disorder that is already written into ‘Ireland’ colonially makes inevitable a volatility in theorising ‘Ireland’. If the colonial brings certainty it rubs against that liminality (in a hollow way it confirms the nation-narrative, while the analogies it sets up are emptied of their meaning).

Mahon’s poems are both aware and wary of the colonial past in Ireland and its influence on the present; but they also propose alternative ways of seeing this, and the contemporaneous problem of the Troubles, through different kinds of cultural experience. The poems contrast an aesthetic realm with its polar opposite, a provincial, ordinary one. What I want to recognise in this thesis is how the poems also provide a poetic substitute through in-betweeness for communally constructed history, where substitutions are made between different time periods and historical places. This sense of Mahon’s relationship with history is less permanent than Catriona Clutterbuck would have it when she reads the contrast between quotidian reality and an imagined artistic one through a historical frame, saying that for Mahon ‘history is a narrative, the story of the past. It is not equivalent to the past itself. […] Mahon doesn’t have an alternative to history.

History for Mahon is complex. More than a ‘story’ it is the basis for often deadly, absolutist ideas in his community and culture. It would be too easy and facile to imply that history’s narrative is a linear thing, remembered in sequence. History in these poems is a jumbled, complicated and difficult thing that trespasses on and threatens the creative or imaginative space.

The anxiety flowing from this is managed through Mahon’s grasp of formal stanzaic structures, the controlled chaos of his integration of subject matter and references to different places, to moderate and exploit the ironic perspectives these poems enjoy using.

This management and the affirmative quality of liminal, interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas prevents the poems from sliding completely into a cultural, religious and political vacuum defined by the fixed parameters of Mahon’s Unionist Protestant background. One significant way that this happens in Mahon’s poems is through the refusal of the traditional mythologies that grow out of places and form the core of centralised communal values. These are supplanted by alternative, subversive ideas and themes.

Hugh Haughton’s essay, ‘Even Now There Are Places Where A Thought Might Grow: Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon’ questions the variety of places in Mahon’s poems. It refers to ‘the strange place of place in the poetry of this conspicuously displaced Irish poet’, and how Mahon ‘feels ill at ease with monolithic nationalist assumptions about ‘Irish’ identity and his own cultural alignment.’ What is missing here is a sense of the constant fluctuation between place in Mahon’s poems and the feeling of existential ardour that develops out of the awareness of so many possible alternatives. This flux disrupts the idea of nation and interferes with traditional narratives around it. This feeds back into the postcolonial reading of liminality where Mahon’s occupying interstitial and peripheral spaces, as in ‘Lives’ or ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ means that the myths and narratives upon which originary culture is built and sustained can be subverted and their hold loosened. Place works as an agitating and destabilising device for accepted cultural signifiers, but paradoxically as part of what Sean Ó Tuama has called a ‘reverence for the home place’. This refusal to be defined by a conventional history and established culture adheres to Turner’s idea about the liminal individual’s detachment from the prevailing cultural conditions or signifiers.

Another complementary way of reading liminality would be to see these poems as concerned with postnationalist viewpoints in the way that Mahon continually wants to get beyond the ‘common condition’ of nationality, religion and politics. This is a contentious issue however due to the obvious preoccupation in these poems with such ideas. Turner’s second definition - liminality as a marginal space – comes into play here

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as Mahon’s poems offer a distanced, contrary perspective and range of settings, on the outskirts of the community, or that condition, where the fixed beliefs demanded by nationalism are less of an influence. Therefore, remote settings and places encountered in these poems are expressions and embodiments of Mahon’s alienation and disenfranchisement from the solid political, religious and cultural binaries of Northern Ireland, from ‘The fiction of national essences’. Simultaneously, these places give expression to his desire to transcend such rigid inherited imperatives.

Terence Brown’s essay, ‘Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting’ sees light as another transcendent characteristic in these poems. Brown’s argument states that ‘Light plays a crucial part in the imaginative world of Derek Mahon’s poetry […] Mahon is attentive also to the act of seeing’. This is too straightforward and fixed. The tone and colouring of Mahon’s poems move between light and dark, he visualises the world through liminal terms. Lightness and darkness signify a progressive alternative and a destructive, introverted reality, respectively. The poems in Lives and The Snow Party are interested in exploring gaps and recesses between these; their visual qualities such as subject matter and imagery switch between clarity and obscurity. Mahon’s imagination and use of imagery is not as one-dimensional or limited as Brown suggests. In fact, many of the poems that I will analyse in this thesis use the adjective dark, as well as or instead of ‘light’. This is a great discrepancy in Mahon’s poems, the simultaneous balancing of opposing forces, one that is progressive and radical, the other closed-minded and conservative.

Not unrelated to light, Rui Carvalho Homem has written on Mahon’s interest in art. He takes a different approach to Brown stating that Mahon’s poetry “resists fixity”, Mahon constantly re-writes himself, re-presenting his poems in successively altered versions. So, the relationship between Mahon, artists and their artwork means that his poems are transitory, volatile and always subject to change. This is revisionism, but more than this, Mahon seems to innovate at the time of writing each poem, not just coming back to make alterations or write a new version at a later date. In one poem he might employ

52 Ibid. pp. 199-200.
54 Ibid. p. 117.
traditional metre, regular line length and stanzaic shape, at others break away from poetic convention, as in his testing of a trimeter stanza that develops through both *Lives* and *The Snow Party*. Mahon’s early poetry also shows instability through its use of subject matter, place and influence, each poem seems to evolve as it unfolds and works out where it is headed. We might liken him to a painter in a studio contemplating the canvases in front of him, adjusting, tinkering, adding or subtracting things. Poetry for Mahon is an evolutionary process.

One idea about how Mahon ‘resists fixity’ is through the receptiveness and inclusivity of his poetry, the espousal of liminal, interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas. Rather than re-writing himself it is more appropriate to say that Mahon is repudiating and interrogating the cultural fixity of the Troubles that might lead to a version of himself that is reliant on a Protestant inheritance. This awareness of the importance of his own subjectivity and identity is existential in nature. Mahon is well aware of the importance of self-analysis.

So liminality allows the balancing of two opposed principles and there are occurrences in the poems where they serve as an echo chamber for the Troubles and move between cultural attitudes. As Seamus Deane states ‘The struggle between community and wasteland which consumes much of Mahon’s writing is not resolved in favour of either. More subtle than a resolution, there is an interweave’. What is important here is not resolution or discord in this relationship but Mahon’s recourse to liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas as a direct challenge to the central, occupied ground of the Northern Irish community with its competing religious and political fixations. Ultimately, both the in-between and on-the-edge definitions of liminality reflect Mahon’s deepening intellectual and creative curiosity in non-traditionalist thinking within locations where these invasive, negative cultural beliefs have less power. The poems’ divergent positions and theorising are open-ended and lack finality. In short, this deliberate pursuit of alternative ideas and themes, of the interstitial and peripheral, is part of a positive process to subvert and undermine the defining cultural beliefs of the Troubles.

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In keeping with Deane’s comment on wasteland, Mahon’s apocalyptic or millenarian outlook is one strategy that prompts liminality in his poetry. Both beliefs are concerned with a significant change and transformation in society and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, predicting that the fall of this world will be followed by a regenerated earthly paradise. Myrtle Hill writes that:

‘Social and political disruption and a feeling of vulnerability seem to characterize these periods when intellectual theological interpretation and popular fears merge in a reading of contemporary events as part of a more universal confrontation between good and evil. […] the language and symbols of millennial ideology deeply ingrained in our culture’.56

It is natural for Mahon’s imagination to have factored this form of belief into his poems given the apocalypse-like cultural climate during the Troubles. In poems such as ‘Entropy’, Mahon presents a world after collapse but with the irony or caveat, influenced by Beckett, that things are not paradisical, God has not come back, things are worse than ever, even the previous imperfect human world linger tiredly on through its non-biodegradable junk and debris. One vital contrast to such millenarian belief is that Mahon’s liminal spaces, whether interstitial, peripheral or existential, are godless.

Neil Corcoran in his essay ‘Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon’ refers to the ‘finely tuned and frequently invoked apocalypticism’57 of earlier Mahon. Mahon’s envisioning of locations after social collapse is frequently in evidence in his aesthetic approach of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the poems ‘An Image from Beckett’ and ‘Entropy’. This is representative of an in-between time where the old order dies an obvious, violent death and disorder bloodily and self-interestedly rules the streets of Northern Ireland. The poems that utilise such a tone present sites littered with the remnants of a previous world that are yet to fully become a new one. The literal Greek meaning of apocalypse is an uncovering, or the revealing of something hidden. I would like to argue that Mahon has this in mind as he uses apocalyptic imagery and subject matter to formulate new, individualistic approaches to the ideology of the Troubles.

In a similar vein, Patricia Horton writing on Mahon’s empathy with apocalypticism and disgust for authoritarianism concludes:

57 Ibid. p. 139.
Mahon’s apocalyptic longings can be read as a challenge to an authoritarian and repressive Protestantism in Northern Ireland and as an attempt to locate a meaningful structure in which he can articulate a sense of self which is denied in the current symbolic order […] Mahon […] refuses salvation, and opts instead for the path of knowledge. 

‘Apocalyptic longings’ is a succinct phrase, but these longings are part of a wider urge towards marginal and in-between zones where the apocalypse will be staged. Apocalypse is not a purely negative thing for Mahon since it represents regeneration, newness and the reassertion of an essential, vital life force untouched by cultural and communal dispute. This protest and the path he takes on this process of discovery are also defiantly liminal, where the paradisiacal promises of religious certainty are replaced by entropic fall-out and random detritus. But Mahon is not just rejecting Protestantism and religious symbolism, his issue is also with linear history and the unbroken narratives it traditionally offers, its own tired symbols and clichés. To achieve this he defers to another philosophical mode, existentialism.

Liminality and existentialism go hand in hand in Mahon’s early poetry, this is exemplified by ‘An Image from Beckett’, where Mahon refuses to route the poem through traditional Protestant and Catholic theologies. These monotheistic forms of belief are important to Mahon’s poems, in that the influence of his Protestant upbringing does play a part in the way he formulates ideas and uses religious material, but Mahon’s poems are offset against the Catholic and Protestant dogma that was a defining aspect of the Troubles. A heightened sense of awareness is gained through such existentialist thinking, which allows for a rational and humanistic voice to emerge in many of the poems, unclouded by the precepts of strict religious belief. Mahon aligns himself with these existential and atheistic tenets by making the whole of the material world subjective and relevant to his reimaging of the Troubles and imposing a tolerant, humane and progressive perspective in Lives and The Snow Party. His responsibility is to liminal, interstitial and peripheral ideas not speaking on behalf of hegemony and the tribe. Perhaps a better way of thinking about Mahon’s interpretation of subjectivity and the self is through Thomas Nagel’s statement that ‘each of us, reflecting on this centreless world, must admit that one very

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large fact seems to have been omitted [...] that a particular person in it is himself. This individuality is apparent in Mahon’s alienation and turning away from his Northern Protestant origins. Mahon’s poems are contradictory in that they push for marginal, interstitial and peripheral locations, they are inclusive and innovative, and refuse centralised religious and political orthodoxies. This is down to his deliberate effort to seek out an individual and unprejudiced voice in the poems.

These imaginative engagements run counter to one of the most violent periods in Northern Ireland’s recent history by destabilising the recurrent motifs of religion, politics and culture. Mahon adopts a sceptical outlook on history and its heritage and is deeply attuned to language’s meaning-making proclivities. He is also inherently suspicious of religion as a construct in society and culture and of the relativistic, contingent nature of belonging. By advancing liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas instead, his intention is to reach outside the narrow confines of tribalism, racial and ethnic memory and historical fascination to find new angles and approaches that counteract these chronic cultural and communal views. This is a rebellion against such notions and a refusal to be defined by their narrow, fixed ideas. Patricia Horton states that ‘Not only are the words ‘home’ and ‘Protestantism’ sites of marginalisation for Mahon, they are also fraught with questions of commitment, duty and responsibility.

His poetry also exhibits both an antipathy towards the idea of communal obligations and a sense of guilt at having rejected his community. This statement points out a dialectical tension in these poems that the inclusion of liminal ideas only emphasises. Although Mahon turns to liminal spaces in his poems to destabilise, interrogate and refuse the inveterate and cloistering terminologies of the Troubles, as well as his own place of origin, his recollection of political and religious ties gets recycled back into the poems. The stress of these opposing forces results in this creative contradiction.

If Mahon feels a sense of marginalization within his own community and cultural inheritance then this is expressed through interstitial, peripheral and liminal ideas about national and cultural affiliations and identities. As Adrian Guelke states ‘Persistence of parochialism and resistance to the influence of globalisation form striking features of the

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politics of Northern Ireland [...] that the province is stuck in a time-warp, remains one of the commonest observations made about its communal divisions. It is this imperviousness and resistance to outside influence and a loyalty to time-honoured cultural beliefs that Mahon reacts against in the poems of *Lives* and *The Snow Party*. To counter this Mahon’s poems disassemble and deliberately rearrange the linear narratives of history that have become the basis of the modern sense of nation.

The poems in *Lives* and *The Snow Party* are the end product of this looking towards the Troubles in examination and then away in disillusionment. Interestingly, in another discussion of ‘The Belfast Group’, whilst making a case for a Northern Irish coterie in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Richard Kirkland does not mention Mahon at all. Despite this outward frostiness towards his categorisation within a clique or shared aesthetic outlook, Mahon’s relationships, engagement and correspondence with his Northern Irish contemporaries and their work has influenced his poetic thinking as much as Northern Ireland and the Troubles did. Rather than treating him as part of a ‘distinct Northern aesthetic’ in this thesis I will consider Mahon as a poet with individualistic tendencies but whose work is still framed by its context. I will also briefly refer to his peers’ work to represent other imaginative responses to Northern Ireland and the Troubles at this time. I want to treat the poem-space developed by Mahon in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an imagined extension of reality, where the political, religious and cultural distinctions of the Troubles are counteracted with liminal, peripheral and interstitial themes.

Having mentioned existentialism, one very prominent way that this philosophy, and therefore liminality, are transmitted and sensed in Mahon’s poems is through the influence of two central literary influences upon these poems, Samuel Beckett and Louis MacNeice, both of whom we can categorise as lapsed Irish Protestants. It is to the influence of these two exemplary figures and the similarity and dissimilarity of their writing to Mahon’s that I would now like to turn.

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63 Ibid. p. 82.
Harold Bloom stated that it is a lack of understanding, or wrongdoing (‘misprision’) committed by a writer against their predecessors, whose importance and relevance they insist on, that defines the influence of those earlier writers upon the later one. Two exemplary figures in this respect, for Mahon, have been Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Mahon channels and balances the influence of both writers in Lives and The Snow Party. All three writers take care in their aesthetic interests to express disenchantment with and alienation from traditional cultural views, within their own contexts. Bloom refers to this as ‘influence-anxiety’ and argues that ‘[…] strong poems are always omens of resurrection. The dead may or may not return, but their voice comes alive, paradoxically never by mere imitation, but in the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners.’

Due to the specific backdrop of the Troubles, the aesthetic and philosophical attitudes of Beckett and MacNeice start to carry new meanings and have particular resonances in Mahon’s poems. I want to argue that Mahon establishes an intermediary, in-between position concerning his debt to these writers’ outlooks.

His poems share with Beckett and MacNeice’s work a perspective where they ‘long for the place and reject the nation, even though they occupied the same territory.’ The poems empathise with Beckett and MacNeice’s disenfranchised Protestant outlooks and their desire to seek out new aesthetic or poetic ideas and locations to express the predicament of their alienation. This is in keeping with the liminal argument that I will pursue in this thesis. Although Mahon shares their literary concerns, he writes from an entirely different set of personal circumstances and a different historical context to both MacNeice and Beckett, this necessitates a new kind of poetic device and expression. Mahon’s background is aligned with working-class Presbyterianism, whereas both Beckett and MacNeice were raised in more affluent middle-class circumstances and brought up as members of the Anglican Church of Ireland. Mahon’s experience of Northern Irish culture in Belfast’s suburbs, inner city and city centre was vastly different to MacNeice’s youth in the quieter Carrickfergus and the English public school system.

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and Beckett’s early years in the affluent Dublin suburb Foxrock in the closing years of British governance of all of Ireland.

Critics have drawn these comparisons with Mahon before, but with only one or the other writer as his touchstone, Beckett or MacNeice. I want to emphasise that what Mahon often achieves, or attempts, in his poems, using a liminal perspective, is the holding of both Beckett and MacNeice’s example up to one another, in the same poem, as a sounding board for his own poetic practice. Their dual influence can make Mahon’s poems appear at odds with themselves and paradoxical, and this can sometimes be confusing. However, it contributes vitally to Mahon’s overall purpose of dealing with the Troubles outside ideological frameworks. This has its origin in a process of disenfranchisement and alienation of all three writers from an Irish Protestant background that they refuse to allow to represent their own cultural attitudes.

Samuel Beckett was born in the Dublin suburb Foxrock in April 1906 to a solidly middle class family. Like Mahon, Beckett studied at Trinity College Dublin before taking a lecturing position at the École Normale Superior in Paris. Beckett returned to lecture at Trinity College in 1930 until his resignation in 1931. He then travelled in Europe, eventually settling in Paris in 1937, where he lived through the Second World War. In bleakly humorous plays, prose and poetry Beckett explores Absurdist methods and existential philosophy, straddling modernism and post-modernism. As Sean Kennedy argues, Beckett became a ‘self-exile’ from Ireland, spurred by a profound sense of alienation from the Puritanism and censoriousness of the Irish Free State that came into existence in 1922. Mahon too became a self-exile, leaving Belfast to study at Trinity College Dublin, spending time in Paris after this, before moving back to Dublin where he taught in schools, and then going to work in London as a freelance journalist. Mahon’s exile is more severe and necessary than Beckett’s, however, due to his early relationship with Protestantism. The cultural influence, restrictiveness and closed-mindedness of this religious heritage were more forcefully exerted in central Belfast than they could ever have been in Foxrock. Beckett’s affluence afforded him luxuries that were not available to Mahon, his family’s propitious financial circumstances allowing him a freedom to pursue his literary ambitions. Tom Walker states that ‘The most consistently Beckettian of contemporary Irish poets, in temperament if not always

66 Ibid.
This is true to a degree. He shares with Beckett an existential, blackly comic outlook and an interest in peripheral locations; but where Beckett seemingly wishes to eradicate the Irish aspect from his work, reducing his settings down to their most basic, primitive level, Mahon is more willing to accommodate such settings, frequently naming Irish places, historical facts and demonstrating an interest in objects and the quotidian that is barely evident in Beckett’s prose, plays and poems. These local concerns, however, are counterbalanced by radically divergent references to objects, places and information from much further afield, both temporally and geographically speaking. In this way the speakers in his poems move liminally and interstitially between the parochial and a far more expansive scope.

The influence of materiality, the day-to-day and real life is more closely aligned with Louis MacNeice’s poetry. Born in Belfast to parents who originated in the west of Ireland, MacNeice deals in his poetry with his estrangement from the Protestantism imposed by his minister father (later a bishop of the Church of Ireland) and also from the North of Ireland, after he moved to England to be schooled at Sherborne School and Marlborough College. He then took a degree in Classics at Oxford University and remained in England (albeit often taking holidays in Ireland) working as an Assistant Lecturer in the same subject at Birmingham University from 1930-1936. Following this he moved to London, travelled to the Hebrides, Iceland, Spain and America, eventually working as a producer for BBC radio until his untimely death from pneumonia in September 1963 after visiting caves in Yorkshire to record sound effects for a radio play that he was producing. Mahon has written perhaps the definitive elegy for MacNeice in the poem ‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’. Mahon’s poem clearly shows the influence of MacNeice’s own opinions and ideas on history, time and the contemporary crisis where the first stanza states, ‘This plot is consecrated, for your sake, / To what lies in the future tense. You lie / Past tension now, and spring is coming round / Igniting flowers on the peninsula.’

In the last quoted line it is also possible to see, at this early stage in Mahon’s poetry, the influence and importance of peripheral places. The churchyard itself is also a marginal place. Later in the poem the speaker refers to the churchyard’s ‘humane perspective’ which signals Mahon’s own universalist principles, an evident humanism and pluralist attitude that, like MacNeice’s poetry, prizes ambiguity and uncertainty. There is a

value in this aligned with MacNeice’s sentiment that ‘in brute reality there is no / Road that is right entirely.’ In the final stanza the speaker refers to ‘Each fragile, solving ambiguity’ a phrase that clearly links to the ambiguity Mahon expresses towards the Troubles and sectarianism through liminal, peripheral, interstitial and existential ideas in *Lives* and *The Snow Party*. These collections offer continuations of and variations on this idea, Mahon deliberately creates ambiguity in these poems, imposing it as a potential solution to his problematising of the Troubles and cultural fixity. That this ambiguity is also fragile suggests the precarious and charged nature of both the Troubles and the solution at hand.

An interest in the everyday world and its detritus and objects strongly aligns Mahon’s early poetry with MacNeice’s artistic principles. Like MacNeice, Mahon also has a predilection for viewing history and time not as linear or teleological, but as fluid, jigsawed, unpredictable and teetering on the apocalyptic. History, time and objects are agitators and a source of anxiety for both MacNeice and Mahon, as Peter McDonald argues, ‘MacNeice, for whom patterns of history were compromised by time, also framed the present between past and future, but tended to depict the contemporary crisis as being on the edge of catastrophe rather than historic illumination.’ In many of Mahon’s poems from *Lives* and *The Snow Party* there seem to be no boundaries restricting the random appearance of historical source, subject matter, or shifts between different time periods and places. Several of the poems I will discuss present societies or places at the point of, or immediately after atrophy, a few employ littoral settings. Such positions are not just highly deliberate choices but central to Mahon’s aesthetic endeavors at this point in his poetry. Mahon’s interpretation of the Troubles leads to poems that are in-between places and times, or in marginal places out on the extreme edges of the community, representative of Mahon’s experience of the Troubles, as Northern Ireland became the site of crisis. The obliqueness and impenetrability of many of Mahon’s poems, I will argue, offers multiple approaches to the ideological dilemma of the Troubles, but no resolution, and none of the revelatory feelings found in poems by Heaney and Longley. Mahon’s essay ‘MacNeice in England and Ireland’ helps shed light on Mahon’s proclivities concerning MacNeice where he talks about MacNeice’s ‘love of surface’ and

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how he was ‘intensely interested in world events.’

Mahon shares these poetic interests as we can see through the obvious influence of the Troubles on the interstitial and peripheral locations in Lives and The Snow Party and how the poems often focus on detritus and junk. Mahon turns away from religious, political and cultural beliefs, like MacNeice, but the real world still impinges upon the aesthetic one; even though his poems use liminal, marginal ideas these are often provoked by Mahon’s alienation from the central communal sphere and his desire to interrogate that through the interstices and the periphery.

Although Dillon Johnston states that ‘From within Belfast the paths of Mahon and MacNeice seem divergent’, with the exception of an obvious class divide and generation gap, the two poets are very much aligned. Mahon remained in Ireland much longer than MacNeice but still left Northern Ireland at a young age, moving to London to become a journalist as MacNeice had done before him. The two poets, as I mention previously, also articulate a disquietude in their poetry about the age and cultural conditions that define them. Rather than defer to the comforting familiarity of their allotted religion and politics, both poets explore ways in which they might define their individual existence in the world. What is lacking in Johnston’s account is an explanation of the deliberate cross-exchanges and allusions that Mahon forms between his poetry and his predecessors, as is the case in ‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’ and in both Lives and The Snow Party. Johnston comments that ‘the history Mahon discards includes the Troubles in Ulster.’ This is far too reductive; Mahon certainly rejects typical approaches to history, the idea of the past as one long unbroken narrative with inherited myths and persistent symbols, but the force of historical events is felt in Mahon’s poetry and is not absent from it. The result is a poetic interrogation of this era that produces a sense of breakdown and crisis and a poetry defined by its liminality, interstitiality, peripherality and heightened existential awareness of its real world origins.

The agitating presence of history then often brushes against the speakers in Mahon’s poems, in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ for example. Contemplating this problem in his essay ‘Derek Mahon: History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond’, Jerzy Jarniewicz mentions

72 Ibid. p. 204.
73 Ibid. p. 225.
“[…] its highly selective character. History excludes more than it includes, and in this sense it is an annihilating force.” Mahon’s poems acknowledge, or counteract, this problem by staging their own breaking down and rearranging of the normal apprehension of history that cultural conventions derive from, this is one pronounced feature of ‘Rage for Order’, for example. Or, in ‘Lives’, the speaker’s chasing a broad variety of cultural and historical perspectives makes the poem inclusive and accommodating of different interpretations of history. We cannot ignore the centrality of the liminal in relation to his poems’ mobility. Mahon’s interstitial deployment of variant subject matter is prompted by an existentially cognizant imagination that is apprehensive towards history and culture.

One of many complicating factors in Mahon’s early poetry is the paradoxical combination of a fond remembrance of Northern Irish landscapes and features, and a derisory, desultory attitude towards the culture of the province, a turning away from an identity based on established ideology and its particular religious and political problems. Patrick Ward comments on the pronounced influence of ‘Irish immigrant experience’ in Irish literature and this holds true in Mahon and Beckett. Physical exile might be one basis for these poems, as is the case in ‘Afterlives’, but perhaps more important is the intellectual and imaginative exile that Mahon’s poems seem forced into by cultural circumstance such as ‘Entropy’ or ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’. The liminal settings for many of Mahon’s poems in Lives and The Snow Party like Beckett’s work often promise only an unremitting sparseness, their locations are either devoid of human life or human beings appear to suffer under the harsh conditions. Frank Sewell has stated how ‘Mahon’s absorption of Beckett’s influence leads him at times to paint a comically grotesque and exaggerated picture of Northern Ireland.’

Like MacNeice, Mahon also resignedly accepts and expresses a dissatisfaction and disconnection with his own time, current events and technological advancement, but is interested in potential deliverance in a new, improved world. This calls to mind MacNeice’s sentiments that ‘Most are accepters, born and bred to harness, / And take things as they come, / But some refusing harness and more who are refused it / Would

pray that another and a better Kingdom come’ in ‘Autumn Journal’.77 As well as resignation and dejection there is an obvious irony here through the use of the religiously charged phrase ‘Kingdom come’ in relation to those individuals who hope to escape or refuse cultural fixity and the contemporary moment. The same thought is at work in Mahon’s poem ‘Ecclesiastes’ albeit using updated subject matter and imagery designed to represent Mahon’s Troubles context. Similarly in his later poem ‘The Kingdom’ MacNeice states that ‘Under the surface of flux and of fear there is an underground movement, […] the Kingdom of individuals’.78 These lines, again using ironic religious allusion, are closer to Mahon’s use of liminality as a mode of cultural resistance, a subversive literary idea that resists fixity through flux and taps into an individualistic mindset rather than a tribal one based on Mahon’s Protestant birthright and its renewed significance during the Troubles.

In the following two chapters I want to continue to think about the influence of Beckett and MacNeice as well as the theoretical implications and underpinning of liminality in Mahon’s early poetry. I am going to offer close readings of some of the best known and most critically debated poems from Lives and The Snow Party. My intention is to show how Mahon intentionally and systematically seeks out spaces, ideas and objects that are inflected with liminality, interstitiality and peripherality, to challenge and offer the antithesis to the fixities, absolutisms and control of the religious and political spheres. The dialectic that is present in these poems deliberately attacks and remonstrates against the existing cultural discourse in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. What I also want to build up is a sense of how these poems use liminality, the interstitial, the peripheral and the existential, through their engagement with place, objects, form and historical information, to establish a positive, pluralist and receptive outlook. This liminal retreat and retort runs counter to the religious and political idealism that prevailed in Northern Ireland, and whose exclusionary, totalitarian, isolationist tactics threatened to obliterate secular, pluralist, creative spaces.

78 MacNeice, 1949, p. 170.
Chapter 1: *Lives* (1972)

Derek Mahon’s poems use liminal spaces to explore interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas. Mahon uses liminality as a positive, outwardly looking, tolerant alternative to the restrictions and cultural fixity encouraged through tribalism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Always running parallel to this are a scepticism and a fatalistic irony as Mahon accepts the inevitable failure of his liminal strategy. *Lives* (1972) responds to the Troubles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, unsettling the fixity and inflexibility of the cultural attitudes that underpinned them. The poems also present a poetic reimagining of the era through the use of liminal sites and perspectives in order to ‘trouble’ the Troubles. By close reading four poems from Mahon’s second collection I aim to show that through such inbetweeness individuality prevails, the poems sharing Hannah Arendt’s sentiment that:

> Thought, finally – which we, following the premodern as well as the modern tradition, omitted from our reconsideration of the *vita activa* – is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom. Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other human activity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under the conditions of tyranny than it is to think.\(^\text{70}\)

Arendt’s comments obviously have a direct bearing on the title of this thesis and all the poems discussed here, but especially ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ which I will discuss at length in the chapter following. The shed is a kind of prison. Culture and its various ideologies is also a prison. Mahon, through liminal ideas and thinking, creates the conditions for his own existence, a free existence where the poems are the manifestation of ‘actual’ thought, a process that is highly sensitive and alert to, but not influenced or swayed by political and religious tyranny.

*Lives* appeared four years after Mahon’s first collection *Night-Crossing* (1968). With its partner volume *The Snow Party* (1975), the volume represents the first installment of a two-book project or phase in Mahon’s poetry where a response to the outbreak of the Troubles is staged. This attitude is designed to deliberately problematise and probe the

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\(^{70}\) Derek Mahon, 1972, *Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). All of Derek Mahon’s poems discussed in this chapter can be found in this edition.

cultural disharmony and fixed cultural attitudes in Northern Ireland, to gain freedom from the ‘tyranny’ of an inherited culture. In my analysis of ‘An Image from Beckett’ (p. 8) I will show how the poem expresses liminality through its setting, speaker and Samuel Beckett’s existential influence. In my exploration of ‘Lives’ (p. 14) I will show how the transformative, shifting nature of the subject matter and places is another way that liminality manifests itself. In my reading of ‘Rage for Order’ (p. 22) I will explore how Mahon turns to liminality to explore tensions between his own sense of aesthetic responsibility and a communally minded outlook. Then, in my analysis of ‘Entropy’ (p. 30), I will show how breakdown, the use of marginal, wasteground and an apocalyptic outlook contribute to this sensibility. The poems push away culture and history and their speakers attempt to extract themselves from these concepts. However, they are always ironically aware of the impossibility and futility of this.

These poems destabilise cultural beliefs that are based on linear, continual history. This is enacted by the poems consciously repairing to interstitial, in-between places and peripheral sites where the individual imagination can be most fully expressed and articulated. I will provide theoretical definitions of liminality and explain how this works in Mahon’s poetry and give some literary context by briefly referring to his contemporaries, Paul Muldoon and Michael Longley. I will also provide a little contextual and biographical information relevant to Mahon’s career and lifestyle at this time.

I will also discuss contradictions in the form of these poems, stemming from built in instabilities and deliberate liminality, the contradictions and paradox in some of the subject matter and the use of a very specific triplet stanza shape that is both highly formal and free-form. Traditional stanza structure breaks down, replaced by innovative postmodern forms. A deliberately induced chaos or anxiety is an integral part of the aesthetic of Lives and relates to Walter Pater’s assertion that artists should always be ‘testing new opinions and courting new impressions’ to fight against ‘fácil orthodoxy’. Reading these poems in this way enables us to understand Mahon’s poetic practice at this initial stage in his literary career, as well as providing a solid basis for the following chapter that will focus on Mahon’s third collection The Snow Party (1975).

One way Mahon provokes unease around orthodoxy and diminishes the impact of these cultural forces is to intentionally manoeuvre poems to the interstices. Mark Nixon observes that ‘inbetweenness is observable in many Mahon poems and also echoes the Beckettian refusal of ending.’ Although we might see this as retreat, Mahon’s movement into and exploration of these spaces is actually a source of great imaginative strength. The word ‘refusal’ is as vital to Mahon as it is to Beckett. It is not necessarily Mahon’s interest in the refusal of an end that we should be directed to here, despite his own investment in reincarnation and rebirth as evidenced in the poem ‘Lives’, rather to his refusal to succumb to intolerance and partisanship.

We might also consider Mahon’s poems as interested in the ‘beyond’ in their eagerness to express and seek out progressive and unprejudiced ideas. Homi K. Bhabha states that:

> The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind […] For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au dela – here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth.

Mahon’s strategic going ‘beyond’ is found in the use of liminal ideas in these exploratory and innovative poems. Liminality itself is a process of moving beyond traditional cultural ties. Here the poems try to move past the Northern Irish attitudes that are so obviously abhorrent and repressive. The interstitiality written into these poems means that this all-encompassing cultural movement that Bhabha describes is inevitable, since the poems never cross-over into an entirely new or fully removed state, a state that is separated, barricaded, from the influence of the Troubles and their divisive politics and religion.

These poems also refute and disrupt the ‘grand narratives’ underpinning our understanding and interpretation of history, nation and culture. In-line with postcolonialism Mahon would splinter and fragment this prescriptive sensibility. Mahon gets beyond Northern Ireland’s own ‘foundational frame’. Importantly, through these terms Bhabha filters Benedict Anderson’s work *Imagined Communities* (2006), where a

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84 Bhabha, 1994, p. 6. “[…] the changed basis for making international connections. The currency of critical comparativism, or aesthetic judgement, is no longer he sovereignty of the national culture conceived as Benedict Anderson proposes as an ‘imagined community’ […] The great connective narratives of capitalism and class drive the engines of social reproduction, but do not, in themselves, provide a foundational frame for cultural identification”.

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sense of nationhood or collective identity based on human imposed limitations and boundaries is proposed, ‘The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries’. Lives resists national and cultural borders by disturbing the cultural narrative of contemporary Northern Ireland. The poems achieve individuality by retreating to the interstices and margins of these boundaries, or stretch the boundaries. These are the spaces to which Mahon stakes his claim in reimagining the Troubles. This is fundamentally linked to the breakdown and dissolution of the idea of grand narratives by postcolonialism and the accompanying scepticism and irony of postmodernism; history is not teleological and predetermined but a broken and splintered thing that is endlessly rearrangeable. In this way Mahon is troubling the Troubles. His poems are invested in a sense of transience routed through Maurice Blanchot’s ideas about solitariness where Blanchot mentions that:

[…] the literary work is neither finished nor unfinished: it is, What it says is exclusively this: that it is — and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. […] The work is solitary: this does not mean that it remains uncommunicable, that it has no reader. But whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work’s solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of solitude.

These poems stand outside history and culture, aware that they, like literature for Blanchot, are neither ‘finished nor unfinished’, they persist and resonate from all eras and impact on the present.

A heightened sense of identity is something that Irish poetry has become particularly adept at negotiating. As Gerry Smith has observed ‘The underlying message is that not only has an authentic Irish identity been ‘disinherited’ and ‘lost’; the cultural forms (such as poetry) through which that identity could be articulated are themselves increasingly alienated.’ The voices in these poems are pushed even further toward an alienation from ‘authentic’ identity, seeing it as a misconception or sham.

In 1967 Mahon returned to Belfast from North America where he intermittently pursued graduate studies, worked odd jobs and travelled to visit friends, notably the poets Louis Asekoff and Eamon Grennan. Mahon was also writing poetry and trying to establish a firm readership and audience. Hugh Haughton provides an illuminating description of this period in Mahon’s life stating that ‘the Troubles offered a brutal challenge to the new generation of Northern Irish poets’. In this thesis I will argue that Mahon’s response to this challenge was to begin writing liminal spaces and ideas into his poetry in an even more focused and sustained way than those of Night-Crossing (1968), where they are first tested. Haughton goes on to explain that ‘Mahon spent two to three years in Ireland, returning initially to Northern Ireland where he taught at Belfast High School’, before writing that ‘Lives as a whole bears the scars of a poet grappling with material too unwieldy to handle.’ The Troubles foreshadowed and ultimately shadow Lives, leading to an interest in ideas such as distracted and stripped down subject matter, the use of different linguistic registers, colloquial and highly intellectual phrases, as well as the formal collapse of Mahon’s previous large stanzas in Night-Crossing to tightly regulated, less expansive ones. ‘An Image from Beckett’ is a case in point when thinking about formal issues.

This poem expresses liminality through its interest in Beckettian existentialism and absurdity. It describes a desolate coastal landscape focusing on its material and geographical features. It is ambiguous whether the location has been abandoned or its people wiped out by an unknown force. Mahon utilises a speaker who obsesses over death and the impact of his existence upon future generations. He ultimately reveals the poem to be his will. He is fixated on the inevitability of death, the idea of imminent extinction and the transience of lived experience:

In that instant
There was a sea, far off,
As bright as lettuce,

A northern landscape
(Danish?) and a huddle of
Houses along the shore.

Also, I think,


A white flicker of gulls and
Washing hung to dry –

The poignancy of those
Back yards – and the gravedigger
Putting aside his forceps.

Then the hard boards
And darkness once again.
Oh, I might have proved

So many heroes!
Sorel, perhaps, or
Kröger, given the time.

For in that instant
I was struck by the sweetness and light,
The sweetness and light,

Imagining what grave
Cities, what lasting monuments,
Given the time.

But even my poor house
I left unfinished;
And my one marriage

Was over as soon as it started,
Its immanence so brief as to be
Immeasurable.

They will have buried
My great-grandchildren, and theirs,
Beside me by now

With a subliminal
Batsqueak of reflex lamentation.
Our hair and excrement

Litter the rich earth
Changing, second by second,
To civilizations.

It was good whilst it lasted;
And if it only lasted
The Biblical span

Required to drop six feet
Through a glitter of wintry light,
There is No-one to blame.
Still, I am haunted
By that landscape,
The soft rush of its winds,

The uprightness of its
Utilities and schoolchildren –
To whom in my will,

This, I have left my will.
I hope they had time, and light
Enough, to read it.

The first stanza provides an initial momentary revelation or ‘instant’ immediately occluded by details of place. Bill Tinley states that ‘the identity of the speaker – is it Beckett or Mahon – is not satisfactorily established’, perhaps this needs to be done. The speaker might be Beckett himself or it might be Mahon himself filtered through his Beckettian mannerisms; either way, the place from which he is speaking to us is characterised by interstitiality and marginality since it is a littoral place too. The speaker seems to be suspended in-between a recognizably human, ordinary world that is expressed through the use of vernacular language and references to objects, and a place of nothingness or transcendence.

The influence of Samuel Beckett is felt in many poems in Lives, but the most overt reference is to be found here as early as the title. Declan Kiberd writes that ‘The Beckett comparison is one that Mahon not only invites but openly acknowledges’. This direct reference to the writer is the basis for much of the poem’s imaginative drive. In drawing influence from Beckett’s starkly existential alienation and failure it transfers Mahon’s predecessor’s nihilistic aesthetic into the poem as a way to process and comprehend the repercussions of the Troubles. Its ‘instant’ represents a reprieve. The deathly language and imagery of the poem and the references to colloquial Northern Irish life are resonances of the time. In this sense the poem is not directly comparable with Beckett, since it is temporally and spatially removed from this era. Rui Carvalho Homem comments on Paul Muldoon’s approach to liminality, writing that ‘Muldoon’s argument about the liminal is largely an instance of self-commentary, a matter of inscribing oneself

in tradition by writing about others’ writing’. So, although Mahon aligns himself with the Beckettian tradition of existential absurdity, his poem is much more entangled and embedded in the specificities and complications of Northern Irish culture.

One important formal feature of the poem is Mahon’s use of a three-line stanza structure. Mahon does reduce the larger stanza, this is in-keeping with the reductive influence of Beckett. However, this also implies that language itself can break down and subvert the specific complexities of history and culture, through sharp, angular movement and brisk line breaks. Beckett’s poems, his ‘Echo’s Bones’ sequence for instance, are highly abstracted whereas Mahon works within a recognisably allusive and traditional formal frame. This is linked to Mahon’s liminal resistance to the cultural problem of the Troubles, of two fixed ideological monologues running parallel but also trying to cancel one another out. His relationship to history and religion is also MacNeicean and anti-teleological, especially when considering the sense of Ulster as ‘god’s gift of land and prosperity to Protestants’ or its ‘chosen people’.

‘Lettuce’ suggests the greenness or white caps of the sea, but this peculiar usage, a particularly bland and monotonous looking leaf vegetable, as a descriptor calls into question any sense of invitation. The lettuce is similar to the sea in its blandness and undulating structure.

The poem’s ‘huddle of houses’ recalls a closed, tightly knit and conspiratorial place, impervious to outside influence, specifically divided Northern Irish neighborhoods. Mahon’s reference to Denmark might be a sly reference to Seamus Heaney’s bog poems, which were composed around the same time. The question, in one sense a random aside completely in-keeping with the oblique nature of this poem, is also perhaps disparagingly aimed at Mahon’s contemporary. In his bog poems Heaney uses archaeological source material, whereas Mahon’s point here seems to be that rather than burrowing down

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93 Edna Longley, 1986, Poetry in the Wars (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books), p. 179. ‘These triplets collapse the big stanza as the poem collapses history into ‘that instant’. Latinate or polysyllabic words, formerly reverberant within a longer line and stanza, now function as rungs of resistance on some inexorable descent.’
96 P.V. Glob, (1969), The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved (London: Faber and Faber). N.B. This work was originally published in 1965 and Heaney states in Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney (c.f. pp. 156-
into cultural tropes, taking them as seriously as their proponents want them to be, Northern Irish poets should be questioning such flawed ideologies. Mahon’s ‘An Image from Beckett’ first appeared in *The Listener* in 1969. In Belfast during the late 1960s there was much competition between poets, as Heather Clarke explains. Its ‘(Danish?)’ takes issue with Heaney’s use of the Jutland peninsula and its bog bodies to write poems that represent and speak on behalf of his community. Although Heaney looks elsewhere and abroad for this material, a trait that is also very discernible in Mahon’s poetry, Heaney’s intrinsic linking of two places and periods in time, Troubles-era Northern Ireland and Iron Age Denmark is part of a mythic framing of violence in Northern Ireland where this is ineluctable and inescapable. This is in opposition to Mahon’s affinity with contingency and possibility. Mahon also utilises images of burial but only in an ironic sense that equates civility with cultural and intellectual death, rather than conception and invention. Whereas Heaney feels ‘lost, / unhappy and at home’ in The Tollund Man, dissatisfied yet bound to exploring parochial problems and feelings, Mahon’s ironic stance dissolves the connections with place and community.

The image of ‘the gravedigger putting aside his forceps’ is a direct reference to Vladimir’s line in Act Two of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* ‘Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps.’ This quote also corresponds to the poem’s fifteenth stanza. Such paraphrasing is more than apt given the gravity of the political situation in the Troubles era. Mahon even inverts Beckett’s already bleak words to give them more futility and further relevance to the Troubles, so that the gravedigger is ‘putting aside his forceps’. This seems like an absurd joke about the prospect of new life during the Troubles.

Inertia, stagnation and claustrophia characterise these lines, yet in Turner’s view the ‘gravedigger’ could play on the crossing of thresholds in life and death. This creates an ironic paradox as the poem is offering new cultural horizons but also negating such possibility. Eamon Grennan points out that ‘In the perspective provided by the grave, ordinary objects shine with a startling vividness. The subdued voice that utters them

138] that upon reading the book, ‘I was in a new field of force. […] Opening P.V. Glob’s book *The Bog People* was like opening a gate.’ These bog poems first appeared in the collection *Wintering Out* (1972) and after that *North* (1975). This subject matter, he says, was an appropriate metaphor for the crisis Northern Ireland was undergoing at the time he wrote these poems.
97 Clark, 2006, pp. 80-89.
allows them an unmediated presence in our sight’. Although these objects do catch our attention, their vividness does not necessarily translate to conviviality, ‘hard boards’ and a ‘gravedigger’ are hardly home comforts. They are transient, their persistence debatable, the gulls only ‘flicker’, as if they will suddenly disappear.

In this poem alternative heroes are sought in literary sources, alternatives to religious heroism and real life ‘heroism’ (carried out by the police, soldiers or terrorists). Sorel refers to Julien Sorel, the ambitious but conflicted protagonist of Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*. Kröger, the other hero, is presumably the eponymous protagonist of Thomas Mann’s novella *Tonio Kröger*. Kröger is a different personality to Sorel since he essentially opts out of society in favour of a wholly creative life. Much like Mann’s novella, Mahon’s poem uses as its speaker an outsider. Mahon sees parallels between Kröger’s protest and his own career as a poet. Inter-textual references in ‘An Image from Beckett’ highlight the importance of the artist as an outsider, but the poem is also a doomed protest against cultural totalitarianism. Declan Kiberd states that ‘Though Beckett might be said to have moved beyond the formal Protestantism of his upbringing, […] it stayed with him to the end, its trace-elements enriched and complicated by elements of eastern philosophy.’ Here, Mahon incorporates elements of European literature to admonish, contradict and augment his Northern Protestant background. The phrase ‘given the time’ raises the question of what should the poet’s role be in dealing with the violence in Northern Ireland; is the correct ethos to engage with and acknowledge this problem head on, or to withdraw and try to look beyond it? Mahon ironises his own implication in religious and political life through his inherited culture and his choice to write poetry.

Repetition is a significant formal resource for Mahon. The phrase ‘in that instant’ appears again in stanza seven and continues to evoke hurry and precipitance, as the speaker

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102 Thomas Mann, (trans H.T. Lowe-Porter), 1955, *Death in Venice; Tristan; Tonio Kröger* (Middlesex: Penguin Books), p. 148-149. I refer to Mann’s famous description of Kröger’s dedication to writing, ‘He worked withdrawn out of sight and sound of the small fry, for whom he felt nothing but contempt, because to them a talent was a social asset like another; who, whether they were poor or not, went about ostentatiously shabby or else flaunted startling cravats, all the time taking jolly good care to amuse themselves, to be artistic and charming without the smallest notion of the fact that good work only comes out under pressure of a bad life; that he who lives does not work; that one must die to life in order to be utterly a creator.’
seems to find short-lived respite from his grim predicament. Paradoxically, the speaker expresses his relief at passing into death, as well as a longing to be able to remain suspended in one moment; despite this yearning, he seems aware of the impossibility of standing still. The imagery here offers a further paradox where the speaker takes a gleeful interest in and seems pleased by the dark idea of ‘grave / cities’. Though perhaps ‘the sweetness and light’ simply refers to the solace afforded by the speaker’s temporary transplantation not the actual place transplanted to itself. We can relate this to Matthew Arnold’s phrase ‘intellectual deliverance […] the demand of the age in which we ourselves live’.¹⁰⁴ Mahon removes himself through poetry to a utopos, or to use Marc Auge’s term a poetic ‘non-space’ where the circulation of history, culture and preordained identities can be contested.¹⁰⁵

This feeling of potential catastrophe and the negative aspects of contemporary culture echoes the first section, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, in T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘The Waste Land’.¹⁰⁶ Mahon’s landscape is both a place of release and agony. This is sharply contrasted in the following line with the image of ‘lasting monuments’ and ensures that the poem is paradoxically balanced between permanence and impermanence, oblivion and remembrance. These ‘monuments’ also imply headstones, war memorials and Northern Ireland’s political murals.

The poem also reads as an ironic elegy for Beckett, for the ‘heroes’ in stanza six who may have fallen too, and perhaps for the fragile peace that was eschewed in Northern Ireland as the Troubles escalated. The phrase ‘given the time’ is then reversed from its previous use, as the speaker finds himself in an ‘instant’ where he can, (although he must go about this expediently since this pronouncement also suggests he has stayed rather late), find respite from a place of suffering and pain.

The language Mahon chooses conveys a difficulty in defining both the location of the poem and the political and cultural allegiance of Northern Ireland. Stan Smith states that ‘It is characteristic of Mahon’s lightly-worn intertextuality that his profound imaginative debt to that paradoxical nihilist should be acknowledged in a poem which purports to be

no more than a gloss on and reiteration of ‘An Image from Beckett’.\textsuperscript{107} Obviously the poem is more than a simple case of poetic plagiarism as Beckett’s philosophical position is resituated in a new context that attempts to engage with complex issues of ancestry, inheritance and seemingly intractable political violence. There is dark humour here in the different biographical contexts of Mahon and Beckett, and their divergent approaches to a similar problem. This is emphasized through the image of ‘great-grandchildren’ and the poem’s remark about burial, that not only relates to death but to darkness and suffocation. I mentioned how Mahon is potentially criticising Heaney’s use of bog bodies, and here the speaker’s age, his spatial and temporal removal as his ancestors are interred again, demonstrates Mahon’s reluctance to be tied down by accepted definitions of identity and his use of liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas to achieve this.

The final five stanzas suggest a civilisation in the process of being wiped out. Their images are representative of the Troubles-era as one on the brink of apocalyptic breakdown, but also admit other historical disasters, as well as announcing the end of the voice’s existence. Eamon Grennan mentions that these two stanzas operate ‘On this illuminated border between life and death’,\textsuperscript{108} but it is not just ‘life and death’ whose threshold the poem stands on. It is pushed towards a point where collapse and extinction are imminent through its liminal approach to a particular set of cultural extremes. The speaker appears to be in limbo, a state in-between life and the afterlife, (Turner uses limbo as an example of a common liminal space). The poem’s littoral, peripheral location is also obviously on the edge. Mahon prizes and sees value in such states, combatting rootedness and attachment with the agenda of, in John Hewitt’s words, ‘an airy internationalist, thistle-down, a twig in the stream’.\textsuperscript{109}

The capitalisation of ‘No-one’ implies God is to blame and again emphasises the influence of existential atheism, a paradox is created that is similar to Soren Kierkegaard’s statement that ‘Against God we are always in the wrong’.\textsuperscript{110} It also further signals that the landscape’s human population has been wiped out, since it follows the line ‘required to drop six feet’, with its black and blithe salute to both the grave and hanging. In fact the


\textsuperscript{108} Grennan, 1999, p. 265.


speaker seems to have fallen through a trapdoor into nothingness and has somehow managed to climb back up temporarily.

The poem’s language hangs by a thread, working its way towards a final ironic, nihilistic blow, delivered with grim delight, as the speaker reveals that we have been reading his will all along. The reassertion of the first person is straightforward but the poem’s indeterminate, disorderly use of tense, going against the regularity of its stanzas, distances the speaker from his contemporaries and inheritors. Seamus Deane also notes how the vacillation of the poem’s language when forced into this form leads the poem to strip itself away:

[…] there is a stern and logical working down to despair, the bleakness enhanced by the professional expertise with which a polysyllabic language, redolent of philosophy and of metaphysics, is constrained within the tight mathematical vice of his stanzas. In ‘An Image from Beckett’, the words can surge against the simplifying demand of the stanza form: ‘With a subliminal batsqueak / Of reflex lamentation’. Or they can co-operate easily with it: Still I am haunted / By that landscape / The soft rush of its winds’. The blends of vocabulary and tone in Mahon’s poetry shift the reader’s attention from specific detail to general conditions. There is no dwelling in the sensuous and no concentration on abstractions. He is neither conceptual nor sensual; his sensibility is equidistant from both but is alert to the attractions of each.111

Deane makes many good points, especially in his reading of tone, but overlooks one of the poem’s defining features, its pleasure in extremely dark comedy.112 I also think ‘shift’ is an important word here. Certainly the language used moves between highly intellectual and colloquial, but the speaker moves between spheres and the poem continually recalibrates itself and the way we should approach the Troubles. The mentioning of ‘schoolchildren’ seems instructive, hopeful that society might learn from his experience and never allow such a catastrophe to happen again. The poem’s final lines are delivered with confidence but contain a skeptical, doomed irony where the speaker’s entreaties from the interstices contradict Bill Tinley’s assumption about the ‘finiteness of the final lines’.113 The closing two lines of ‘An Image from Beckett’, on first reading, represent an

112 Terence Brown, ‘An Interview with Derek Mahon’, in Poetry Ireland Review, No. 14, (Autumn, 1985), pp. 11-19. Mahon when asked about his affinity with Beckett states that, ‘I think the first time I read Beckett I found him so hilariously funny, and it was exactly the kind of humour that I’ve always enjoyed.’
apparent shift to a calmer more optimistic tone, (as does the prior reference to ‘schoolchildren’ who represent a new generation), following the frenzied, angst ridden theorizing of those that precede them.

This is over-ridden if we take the ‘will’ to mean the speaker’s life force instead of his will and testament. Even though he displays strength of character in living on, beyond unusual suffering, his human will is likely to be tainted by an acquaintance with such maladies as detailed in the poem. Mahon’s own strength of intellectual will to pursue the liminal, interstitial idea, not to cede to exclusivity and absolutism, is important to keep in mind at all times when reading these poems.

‘Lives’, this collection’s title poem, takes the form of a narrative delivered by speaker who is unencumbered by temporal, geographical and cultural boundaries. The poem provides another imaginative space or recourse for Mahon from the Troubles. The poem is therefore heavily invested in liminal ideas due to the speaker slipping between places and cultures. We might turn to Heidegger for a philosophical perspective on the interstitial aspect of liminality where “The until then is Articulated by interpretation: it ‘has its time’ as the “in between”, which likewise has a relationship of datability. This relationship gets expressed in the ‘during this’ or meanwhile’ [während dessen …].”

‘Lives’ is a ‘meanwhile’, an imagined alternative where permissiveness and radical ideas about culture counteract a traumatic, authoritarian reality. It is also interested in the idea of ‘datability’ in its movement through historical eras and the gathering of data.

The opening stanzas, related to us in the first person use a hard-working, meticulously structured trimeter, as was the case in ‘An Image from Beckett’. The voice is prone to or capable of sudden, unexpected metamorphoses and transformations, ‘a world perpetually reinscribed under the rubric of recurrence” as Stan Smith mentions. The abrupt nature of the opening sentence in which the voice makes the first of its pronouncements about its physical guise continues through the poem as the speaker changes and is physically transplanted or displaced:

First time out

115 Smith, 2005, p. 177.
I was a torc of gold
And wept tears of the sun.
That was fun but
They buried me in the
Earth two thousand years
Till a labourer
Turned me up with a pick
In eighteen fifty-four
And sold me for
Tea and sugar in
Newmarket-on-Fergus.
Once I was an oar
But stuck in the shore
To mark the place of a grave
When the lost fleet
Sailed away. I thought of
Carthage but soon withered.

The declaration ‘First time out’ hints at reincarnations to come, but also a sense of the
‘recurrence’ that Smith suggests. The speaker is fated to encounter the same complexities
concerning identity over and over. The throwaway nature of the first line is also telling,
the voice is able to move between identities and inhabit objects at will. The fact he takes
the form of a ‘torc’ recalls ancient Celtic history and the long struggle of different
cultural groups to settle and impose themselves on Ireland.

In the poem all identities are contingent, mobile, irremediable things. Mahon
incorporates multiple speakers, cultures and forms of identity (that could continue ad
infinitum should the point need to be proved further) to demonstrate how there can be
no fixity or resolution. The poem is therefore protean and relativistic in tone, subject
matter and form, forcing the reader to meditate on change, chance and the mutation of
ideas and objects through time. The literary dialogue here is with Heaney whose poems
are determinedly placed and in fact tend to mythologise places in Northern Ireland.

Through burial the speaker is removed from the proper historical context for a ‘torc’; the
same thing happens again when next he changes into an ‘oar’ that ends up ‘stuck in the
shore’. The ‘oar’ recalls Odysseus’ ‘winnowing oar’ in books XI and XXIII of Homer’s
The speaker is separated from his people as ‘the lost fleet / sailed away’. The estrangement evidenced in the poem can be read as an indication of Mahon’s own relationship to his Protestant origins. An ‘oar’ is also an ordinary implement used to row so the image continues a sense of movement and gravitation away from these origins. The proclamation ‘I thought of Carthage’ emphasizes the speaker’s ability to decamp spontaneously. Read another way it brings a sense of disaster and dread to the poem through the turbulent history of that city. Although historical objects, places and history itself are all cited and reveled in, they also have a debilitating effect on this speaker; constant movement betrays his wish to be liberated from their weight altogether. Maybe these objects are inadequate hosts for whatever \textit{élan vital} he possesses, but the option of being nothing at all is not open to him. Jonathan Hufstader supposes that the poem is a form of disembodiment where the speaker attempts to escape his physical form and become a purely metaphysical entity stating that Mahon is:

\begin{quote}
Constantly setting himself over against the violence from which he is trying to escape, the poet dialectically encounters that very violence within himself [...] The primary tropes of \textit{Lives} – imaginative reincarnation and multiple identities – although they serve to liberate consciousness from its initial bondage to the here and now, prevent their protean subject from establishing any identity and therefore from finding any ground to take up, any position to establish. \footnote{Jonathan Hufstader, 1999, \textit{Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), pp. 114-117.}
\end{quote}

‘\textit{Lives}’ deliberately resists the idea of the individual defining their existence through an inflexible set of cultural beliefs or a continuous narrative as was seemingly the case for many during the Troubles. These ‘multiple identities’ stem from Mahon’s insistence on the prominence of the individual, and the diversity of the individual’s freed imagination, above tribal affiliation. The speaker’s movement in-between these is a liminal state dependent on the interstitial reading of Turner’s idea. Being an outsider, or interloper, the speaker is also marginal to the cultures that he materialises into.

The above lines, in contrast to Hufstader’s views, relate specifically to Irish identity with their local objects and especially through the naming of the Irish town ‘Newmarket-On-Fergus’. I concur with Hufstader that the movement of the speaker is so extreme and his experience as each item so fleeting that his enterprises in the end could lead to nothingness. However, it is Mahon’s making his speaker a liminal and interstitial entity

\footnote{Homer, (trans. E.V. Rieu), 2003, \textit{The Odyssey} (London: Penguin Classics).}
that is the most compelling fact in this poem. His inhabitation of places and objects is written into the poem intentionally by Mahon so that fluidity, independence and free-thinking can oppose and repel the restrictions and captivity of cultural fixity. We might call him a shape-shifter, averse to being molded by history and culture.

This Irish-centric language changes when the voice mentions ‘Carthage’. Stanzas seven to eleven widen the poem’s dealings with history and place. He has fond memories of this transient time, the ‘Navaho rug’ shielded him from the trials of outside world and the anxieties and encumbrances of history. As clay he would have been a malleable substance, able to be formed into many shapes. The speaker’s change to this form offers the clay’s blankness and potentiality, its own liminal, interstitial quality, as a challenge to the historical and cultural complexities the poem deals with:

The time that I
Liked best was when
I was a bump of clay

In a Navaho rug,
Put there to mitigate
The too godlike

Perfection of that
Merely human artefact.
I served my maker well –

He lived long
To be struck down in
Tucson by an electric shock

The night the
Lights went out in Europe
Never to shine again.

These stanzas demonstrate the speaker’s aggravation and confusion at the religious and political solutions to identity issues in Northern Ireland. This idea is related to Peter Childs’ reading of the continual and ongoing, if not always acknowledged, presence of the Troubles:

Like much of the Northern Irish poetry I have discussed, it aims to do at least two things at once and the subject of the poem appears distant from contemporary history, but its resonances and symbolism lead the reader to an
understanding of how the Troubles are ever-present in Northern Ireland and yet do not loom large in most people’s day-to-day lives. Mahon’s themes of exile and exclusion are as much a commentary on the continuing legacy of British colonialism as are Heaney’s poems of violence and tribalism in *North*.\(^{118}\)

Childs’ ideas about ‘exile and exclusion’ are analogous with the speaker’s self-marginalisation through liminality. They apply to colonialism and displacement. The speaker takes an exuberant thrill in displacing himself and in doing so disrupting cultural obstinacy. He is obsessed with mobility and dynamism in his migration through many varying locales, time periods and cultures. Displacement is deeply ingrained in the various historical attempts to occupy Ireland. Mahon and this poem see the Troubles as one more episode in these attempts to dominate culture and impose order or ideological superiority. The poem’s allusion to ancient Ireland, to Tara perhaps and other prehistoric archaeological remnants such as Newgrange or Carrowmore, through to more modern history, such as the industrialisation of Belfast in the nineteenth century gives a sense of this as a continuing problem. This is illustrated by the speaker’s awareness of the ‘electric shock’ suffered by his ‘maker’. He also undertakes a complex journey where on the one hand he is permitted to belong to and occupy Northern Irish and Irish modes of being and on the other is driven away from these, or flees voluntarily out of a deep unease with history. Fortunately there are plenty of available alternatives in which he sequesters himself. Liminality is a prized state that Mahon embraces throughout this poem and the others discussed here.

The following five stanzas express the speaker’s heightened existential awareness of his liberation from fixed cultural notions and continue to show what an agreeable process this is. This is a reflection on the entirely chance circumstances of Mahon’s birth in Belfast at a particular point in time. As Hugh Haughton states, ‘He is an acutely historically sensitive writer, but he does not share the need to possess history and appropriate the uniquely Irish past that you find in Heaney’.\(^{119}\) The following stanzas broach this idea through their pressing of the accumulation of cultures all with distinct histories:

So many lives,

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So many things to remember!
I was a stone in Tibet,

A tongue of bark
At the heart of Africa
Growing darker and darker…

It all seems
A little unreal now,
Now that I am

An anthropologist
With my own
Credit card, dictaphone,

Army-surplus boots
And a whole boatload
Of photographic equipment.

The language here is highly ambiguous, it is either excitable and intrepid or it is overwhelmed and nervous. Eamon Grennan notes this duality saying ‘the life of this object comes to us as pliable speech – colloquial, well-mannered, with its own excitement and its own melancholy.’ Grennan’s opinion that the voice is ‘well-mannered’ feels off-target, since this duality in the delivery undermines any attempt we might make to read the speaker’s real intentions one way or another. The speaker is susceptible to various mood-swings, from open, honest and forthright, through to mischief making and teasing but the mercurial nature of this poem has more serious implications.

As the speaker’s list tumbles on, the geographic context widens again, supporting Catriona Clutterbuck’s notion that ‘Mahon’s urge towards displacement is attributable to one factor in particular: his work links rootedness in place to the end of communication by writing.’ By veering off to ‘Tibet’ and ‘Africa’ the voice continually extricates itself only to reform and re-emerge elsewhere. These are popular tourist destinations but for their indigenous peoples are not necessarily pleasant places. Parallels emerge between

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120 Grennan, 1999, pp. 265-266.
121 Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), 1990, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge), p. 300. I am thinking here of what Bhabha says about identity, ‘Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and ease its tantalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities.’
Tibet’s disputed political status and the political struggles in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

A final change into an ‘anthropologist’ is apt given the poem’s movement between and collecting of identities and cultures and the way that it sits between being a subject and an object of history. It seems both ironic and sincere. He even has a ‘dictaphone’, ‘And a whole boatload / Of photographic equipment’ to try to interpret and capture these although this is impossible. His ‘Army-surplus boots’ hint at conflict and unease in the places the anthropologist is going to explore, or where he has come from. The ‘credit card’ mentioned comes across as a knowing joke that implies this item has little to no use out in the field of history. These tools for the job might prove inadequate rather than revelatory. Dillon Johnston has suggested that the voice in ‘Lives’ belongs to an ‘archaeologist who fingers shards and reflects on the striae of civilizations within himself.’

I disagree with Johnston; he seems to imply that the anthropologist is the speaker for the whole poem when the anthropologist is simply one facet or version of a shape-shifting speaker. But following Johnston’s point I would also like to link this figure back to Heaney’s bog poems. The anthropologist undergoes a far more tenuous and unstable relationship with place than an archaeologist; the former is a transient individual who slips in and out of cultures, adapting as needed to different conditions, whereas the latter becomes entrenched, puts down in one place for a prolonged period. John Goodby compares Mahon’s ‘Lives’ with Heaney’s Wintering Out:

The poem ‘Lives’ is affectionately but slyly dedicated to Heaney, and critiques the archaeological paradigm […] The eclectic mixture of (non-Irish) belief systems, narratives and cultures prevents a single historical narrative, and provides stimuli to the mobile imagination rather than hermeneutical props for ontological groundedness. This range implicitly identifies nationalisms as Eurocentric and teleological, rejecting precisely the linear ‘artesian’ narrowness Heaney prized, and for this reason the archaeologist-as-poet is discarded in favour of the anthropologist as a more appropriate model.

Mahon’s speaker is dependent on mobility and could never attain or express the kind of certainty Heaney does in ‘The Tollund Man’, where the speaker reels off Danish locations with such certainty and trust in linear historical narrative. Mahon’s poem with its universalist demeanour and transition through cultures, seeks to affirm and pursue

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such ideas as indecisiveness, contingency, flux and indefiniteness. The speaker is bewildered by these overpowering alternatives. This realisation, or unreality, has its origins in the resurgence of nationalistic feeling in Ireland during the Troubles when ‘the old and still not adequately answered Irish Question illustrates this uncertainty’, as Eric Hobsbawm observes.

So successful is this tactic that the speaker’s existence is about to cease: he has acquired so much knowledge and information that its gravity or ballast threatens to overwhelm and consume him. So too do the new identities he has been trying to attain but also pushing away. The speaker desires to know so much, as this fresh cultural knowledge is the necessary antidote to the kind of closed-mindedness that leads to sectarian conflict. MacNeice’s spirit is at work here, directing us to the value of uncertainty, displacement and rootlessness. These are ideas abhorred by tribalists of all ilks:

I know too much  
To be anything any more –  
And if in the distant

Future someone  
Thinks he has once been me  
As I am today,

Let him revise  
His insolent ontology  
Or teach himself to pray.

It is important not to overlook the obvious scepticism and ironic vision here, especially in the speaker directing us finally, to of all things, prayer. It seems laughable that he should recommend a cornerstone of religion after his own wild deviations away from these in an apparent escape attempt. This line also conveys a clear atheistic existential sentiment in its insistence on the importance of individuality and accountability. Variation and range in the speaker’s travels lead to a paradoxical realisation that despite life’s profusion this amounts to nothingness, as Hugh Haughton mentions ‘Mahon’s poetry is almost too aware of its multiple and mobile anthropological alternatives to have its own identity. […] The mobile pluralism of the poem’s speaker bespeaks a curiously

privileged universalist stance but also a terrible emptiness.'¹²⁶ Maybe it is more than an awareness of these alternatives that troubles the speaker in ‘Lives’, maybe it’s the actual continual, systematic clashing exposure to all of these options and experiences.

One final idea that I would like to introduce here concerns the shape-shifting, temperamental nature of Mahon’s ‘Lives’. The folklorist and Celticist Alfred Nutt refers to ‘the tradition of Tuan mac Cairill, oldest of men, who had been first stag, then wild boar, then eagle, lastly salmon, and who has witnessed all the history of Ireland’.¹²⁷ This speaker with his extensive store of memories that are all recalled through the voice’s shape-shifting, metamorphic nature seems comparable to him. However, Mahon modifies and subverts this traditionally Irish mythological motif by having the poem’s voice morph into, segue between and between Irish tropes and places on the one hand, and those from non-Irish cultures and traditions on the other. This voice seems able to recall not just Irish history, like Cairill, but great swathes of world history in vivid detail. The speaker’s flight also has parallels with the mythical king Sweeney, particularly the later translation of this myth Sweeney Astray (1983) by Heaney. However, where Sweeney Astray takes in mostly Irish locations, Mahon’s switching interstitially from the specifically local to the waywardly global is a liminal gesture. ‘Lives’ is demonstrative of Mahon’s uneasy alienation as an Ulsterman from both Northern Protestant identity and a more traditionally Irish Celtic one.

‘Rage for Order’, with its titular allusion to Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, unlike the shifting ‘Lives’, expresses liminality through parochial issues. The poem takes the form of a narrative by an unidentified observer of a indeterminate place who has developed a fixation on the poet in the poem. It speaks of how this poet lives on the edges of the community. He is caught between a wasteland and a supposedly civilised area. This conforms to both of Turner’s definitions of liminality. The place in the poem is also defined by interstitiality, since it is no longer a place of civility but one of lawlessness. The speaker and the ‘poet’ of the poem are alienated restructurers, the poet seeks out order, the rioter mayhem. Jacques Derrida might have been speaking of them both when stating ‘At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought,

which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession.  

Mahon dismantles and is dispossessed of the cultural fixities of the Troubles by writing liminal, interstitial and peripheral ideas into these poems:

Somewhere beyond
The scorched gable end
And the burnt-out
Buses there is a poet indulging his
Wretched rage for order –

Or not as the
Case may be, for his
Is a dying art,
An eddy of semantic scruple
In an unstructurable sea.

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 a Claudian emperor –
Nero if you prefer,
No mother there;
And this in the face of love, death and the wages of the poor.

If he is silent
It is the silence
Of enforced humility,
If anxious to be heard
It is the anxiety of a last word

When the drums start –
For his is a dying art.
Now watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

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To build up
With a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long till I have need of his
Germinal ironies.

Both figures, though opposed in their values, experience a heightened existential awareness of reality; they are alone and dissatisfied. The poet is closely linked to James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus whose ‘sensitive nature was still smarting under the lashes of an undivined and squalid way of life.’ 129 The poem uses a cinquain stanza to present a place that for the poet has become a cultural ‘desert’, and for the speaker is in the process of becoming a ‘wasteland’. This form, the consistent inconsistency of its line breaks, line length and rhyme scheme cause the poem to be structured but unstructured. It describes the lifestyle and peculiarities of this poet who resides both above and outside a vandalised neighborhood, seeing things only from his Larkinian ‘high window’ and being ‘far / From his people’. The poem’s purpose seems to be to accentuate the poet’s place as being not fully part of his own community but not completely severed from it, since the poem is narrated by an individual within this community who has caustic, disparaging words for the bard. The poem also draws out a tension between the aloof, perhaps culturally elitist nature of the poet’s lifestyle, (the ‘high window’ suggests an ivory tower and the general feeling of the poet being above it all), and the general public who must negotiate the maelstrom. ‘Rage for Order’ opens with this series of searing images that are hard not to read as a thinly veiled reference to the Troubles.

So apparently translucent are these associations and overtones that Sarah Broom has referred to Derek Mahon’s work as ‘an austerely philosophical poetry, full of intensity and rigorous self-questioning, and some of his poems, like ‘Rage for Order’, have become landmarks in the Northern Irish poetry of the Troubles’. 130 A sense of guilt is found in this poem caused by Mahon’s role as a poet; the purely aesthetic act of writing is an indulgence in a time of intense cultural crisis. The speaker mentions how ‘the drums start’ and this image pertains to Broom’s comment, being immediately reminiscent of parading in Northern Ireland. However, the connection between ‘Rage for Order’ and

the Troubles is not as clear cut as Broom would have it, as the poem questions the actions of the vigilante or political activist as well as those of the poet or aesthete.

The opening lines establish both the otherness and outsideness of the poet and relate to Paul Muldoon’s emphasis on ‘narthecality’ in Irish poetry. The poet’s appearance only extraneously presents him as irrelevant and out of touch with society, abstracted from the important, era-defining, main-events of history. The speaker’s position posits that these goings on are mere insignificances to the poet as the focus pans out from the central and communal, with its ‘scorched gable end and ‘burnt-out / Buses’, to the peripheral. Edna Longley acknowledges this same feeling of poetry issuing from and occurring on the edges of the community stating that ‘Mahon’s poem ‘Rage for Order’ fully acknowledges shock and impotence, although in the spirit of ‘enforced humility’ rather than inviolate privilege. The poem also implies that the very nature of the poet’s activity, a search for form, relegates him to the sidelines […] History marginalises poetry, not poetry history.’

In contrast to the idea that poetry is frivolous in times of crisis, Mahon paradoxically suggests, at the end of the second stanza, that he is protecting a discipline endangered by mindless violence prompted by regressive, closed off cultural convictions and intolerance. Poetry is progressive and tolerant activity and also the abode of valuable liminal ideas at a time of crisis and violence. The use of the word ‘enforced’ is key to this idea, in that Mahon obviously sees the authoritarian and fetishistic attachment to cultural fixity in Northern Ireland and reacts to this by implementing liminality, peripherality and interstitiality in the poem. Mahon’s interrogatory use of existentialism also contributes to this urge to be free from culture’s grip.

Certainly, Mahon’s poetry in Lives is troubled by the amorphous, inchoate characteristics of history, rather than satiated by its linear, horizontal (Anderson’s word for nation building) attributes as the political and religious institutions, who rely on such a simplified definition, would have it. Likewise, the national and cultural identities created from such disengaged readings of history and how people become attached to these are insufficient and too incongruous. Mahon is aware of his complicity in the Troubles, being a Protestant Northern Irishman. These poems through the range of their intertextuality display a promiscuous allusiveness when considering them to be inbetween such issues.

The presence of Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ and W.H. Auden and Philip Larkin’s poetic vision are all strongly felt in ‘Rage for Order’. In the poem order and disorder compete. The poet and the speaker’s involvement in this stems from their marginalisation, both are solitary figures acting alone. Both are also interstitial figures. The poet is in-between the community (an outsider on the inside) and a wasteland. The speaker, belonging to the community, is poised between respectful society and criminal activity. One alternative for the poet, forced to retreat from history, is to seek propriety in poetic form itself. These kinds of discrepancies are evident in ‘Rage for Order’ where the unified, five line stanza contrasts with the use of half-rhyme and the clash between two diametrically opposed positions in its subject matter, that of the speaker who belongs to the community and that of the poet who distinguishes himself from it.

A feeling of isolation is expressed in the third stanza through the lines ‘He is far / From his people’. This is not just a geographical comment but an ideological one. The figure has adopted a non-committal position to Northern Irish religion and politics, removed from the mindset and structure of the rest of his community. His commitment and principles are defined by their liminality. This position is emphasised by his interstitial and peripheral location. I would also reason, since the poem uses the figure of an alienated, individualistically principled poet, that it is a reflection of Mahon’s own stance towards both Belfast and its warring factions during the Troubles. The speaker is reluctant to be hemmed in by the usual cultural categories and the limitations they impose.

The next image of ‘the fitful glare / Of his high window’ reminds us of sunlight glinting off a window during the day or a bright light shining through one at night. Terence Brown has commented on this aspect of the poem noticing ‘the futility of art in a world of urban warfare with its burnt buses and broken glass. Against this the poet can only proffer in a metaphor which combines light with observation.’ This image is not solely of light since a ‘fitful’ nature also encompasses a darkness that defines this time period.

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133 Brown, 2010, p. 204.
‘Glare’ carries a double meaning since it refers to a hostile look and the poem imagines two very different sides, the aesthete who seeks to create and the vigilante who would ‘tear down’, are staring one another out. Here liminal ideas are sensed again as the freeing, open-minded ideas of the poet and the prohibitive extremism of the vigilante go head to head. Mahon deliberately integrates liminal thinking in this poem to protest against the latter’s bigotry and intolerance. The glare alerts us to the sporadic manner of the poet’s work. The chaos that has occurred reasonably close by apparently has a detrimental, sapping effect on literary endeavour, but also causes this to be highly intense and incendiary. In-keeping with the ‘glare’, the speaker issues a challenge to the poet as if he wants to face off and say he has bettered the writing of poems by carrying out random acts of civic disorder and destruction. The speaker assumes the role of deed-doing, bragging antihero, baffled by and contemptuous of the poet’s inactivity. Mahon plays on a famous line from another poem, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, in Auden’s ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’;134 another inter-textual reference is to Larkin’s ‘High Windows’135 with its desire for transcendence made clear in the final stanza. Frank Sewell also cites Larkin’s influence stating that, ‘Mahon echoes Larkin in suggesting that it is not the place’s fault but that of the people.’136 The ‘scattered glass’ and other images of activity provide a close-up on unrest to contrast with the poet’s inertia and liminal state, neither totally removed from society, nor fully a constituent of it. Contrasted with this is the placid nature of Larkin’s window that Mahon’s poem wants to smash to make the point that restricted and fixed cultural views are confining.

The reference to Nero evokes that emperor fiddling while Rome burns. It is an insinuation that the poet is the guilty culprit, instigating social disorder for his own advantage and amusement. With a piece of his own rhetoric that shows, unlike the poet, he has the common touch, the speaker contrasts the poet’s indifferent aloofness with ‘love, death and the wages of the poor’. This dialogue between two kinds of accountability and participation in an event can be linked to Richard Kirkland’s comment that ‘Rage for Order’ ‘encounters social violence through a framework of personal responsibility and mobilizes the conflict between these responsibilities and the demands

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136 Kennedy-Andrews, 2002, p. 200. Sewell is writing about a later poem, ‘North Wind: Port Rush’, but the principle is the same, this also underlines the importance of ideas in Mahon’s early poems reoccurring, serving as a source for his later poetic direction.
of social affiliation." An individual’s apprehension of identity is a matter of allegiance and philosophical perspective; the poet may come across as disinterested and irresponsible but this allows him, through a deep connection with his art, a unique and valuable insight into the community. Distance should not be interpreted as dismissal. Similarly, though the speaker may closely involve himself in frightening social unrest at least his riotous accomplishments are immediately provocative; however the poem also exhorts that this is perhaps not always a propitious standpoint from which to critique and advise one’s community.

Mahon’s use of the hybrid word or pun, ‘germinal’, is interesting here. Germ refers to something viewed by most people as nasty and unpleasant, bacteria or a microorganism, but it can also refer to a point of origin, a root or a beginning. I would link the first of these readings to the invasive, contagious nature of the dominant, inflexible renderings of identity prominent during the Troubles. The second suggests that the underlying stimuli for such identities lie both in art and literature, as well as in the church and government, the traditional organisations of the state. The language throughout ‘Rage for Order’ is informed by this hybridity through Mahon’s combining of colloquialism and idiom with an abstract philosophical vocabulary. As such the language is between two registers and operates on a threshold.

The poet’s reticence and ‘silence’, balanced out by his ‘anxiety’ and more forthcoming moments are tied to this realisation about how a people thinks about itself. The poet’s reluctance to contribute to repressive versions of identity, limited imaginings as Benedict Anderson has it, and his concern to speak out to prevent this happening are concomitant. He knows anyway that by saying anything he is ineluctably complicit in this process. The other word suggested by this pun is terminal, meaning not a start, but an end point. The speaker views the poet’s role as only useful for spinning out ironic content, implying that serious ideas and about society issue from elsewhere, politicians and priests perhaps. The paradox here lies in the speaker’s prescient realisation that although he may be acquainted with violence and rioting, he knows the poet has better powers of intellect and expression than himself. Stan Smith has written on this quality:

But Mahon’s poem then turns the tables on this contempt for the poetic maker, as its reproachful speaker is revealed not as the poet at all but as some self-styled maker of history, a politico contemptuous of poets, but admitting at last that his ‘desperate love’, which claims to tear down in order to build up, will before long have need of the poet’s ‘desperate (sic) ironies’. The play between the history-maker’s singular and ‘desperate love’ and the poet’s plurally ‘desperate ironies’ is a key one in Mahon’s perception of the relation of art to politics.¹³⁸

The speaker questions his own relevance in a potential future time of peace when someone with eloquence and knowledge might come into their own. Smith mentions how the speaker wishes to ‘tear down / To build up’ but offers no real advancement as to what this might refer. Mahon’s poem is interested in the physical reshaping of the surroundings during and in the aftermath of the stormy scenes describe at the start of the poem; reminiscent of the Troubles. It is also fuelled by its concern with an abstracted, ideological reconfiguring that is related to Anderson’s idea of the ‘imagined community’. The poem is also mindful of poetry and history as artifice. It knows that both are made, contingent things that are determined as much by the incidental as deliberate human action and serve a particular set of principles and beliefs.

Two further ironies are evident here; one that stems from the speaker’s eventual reliance on the poet’s way with words, though he believes poetry to be virtually extinct. The other revolves around the phrase ‘desperate love’: it is hard to see how somebody obviously committed to the wanton destruction of his community or art could possibly love it. This is related to Edna Longley’s idea that ‘The whole area [Northern Ireland] operates as a lieu de mémoire: territory marked outwardly by competing symbols, inwardly by communal understandings of history.’¹³⁹ Mahon’s deliberate use of liminality, interstitiality and peripherality circumvents any allegiance to these ‘symbols’ and ‘understandings’ by creating an imagined alternative to the real obstacles faced by Northern Ireland when the Troubles flared in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Whereas ‘Rage for Order’ offers at least a semblance of society in its wrecked space, ‘Entropy’, capitulates entirely to collapse. This poem depicts a desolate, wasted landscape strewn with human rubble, the speaker seems to be part of a small group of survivors living in a post-apocalyptic time. Liminality is expressed through an apocalyptic interest

in social collapse and detritus, but its flawed utopos is doomed at source. Patricia Horton states that Mahon’s ‘use of apocalypse can also be located as an aspect of that Protestant imagination […] Rebell[ing] against the law and organised religion he imagines apocalypse, the sweeping away of institutions and authorities and their replacement by Mahon’s own version of an ideal society’. In a breach with Protestantism and the fixity of Northern Irish culture Mahon’s survivors inhabit interstitial structures and spaces. But the authoritarian world lingers on in the form of detritus from the defunct civilization.

Mahon reverts back to the triplet stanza of ‘An Image from Beckett’ and ‘Lives’ as part of an overarching formal and aesthetic plan. If the scenery in ‘Rage for Order’ is in the process of being defaced, then the landscape in ‘Entropy’ is sheer aftermath. The fact that these objects, the people (presumably ashen-faced survivors) and the geography whose plight the poem describes are marginal and interstitial entities is consistent with John Kerrigan’s assertion that ‘Every cycle can be recycled; so, in ‘Entropy’, there is a gleam of transcendence when “The roads at evening glitter / with ditched bicycles”. Clearly there is a link between “waste” and what lies near the heart of Mahon’s sensibility.

This sense of transcendence and transience in discarded objects and rubbish reminds us how Mahon’s poetry takes Northern Ireland’s social breakdown and failures to an extreme poetic conclusion, at an extremity. The poem, in a peripheral space of waste objects, fuses images of organic simplicity with manmade technology. Its speaker appears to be the leader of this remaining group who are caught up in an atheistic, catastrophic reimagining of Exodus. It is in this poem that Mahon’s taste for discarded places and decimation are given their fullest treatment:

We are
Holing up here
In the difficult places –

In caves,
Terminal moraines
And abandoned farmhouses,

The wires cut,
The old Citroën
Disposing of itself for

Death among
The inscrutable,
Earth-inheriting dandelions.

The roads at
Evening glitter with
Ditched bicycles,

At morning with
The bronze shards
Of a monumental sculptor

Who lived
In the big house before
Being bought out

By a property speculator
Who failed O-levels, O
Time thy pyramids…

We are
Hiding out here
With the old methods –

Growing our own,
Chasing hares in the rough.
We are not quick enough

Having become
Heavy and slow from
Long urban idling.

We have tried
To worship the sun,
To make gods of clay,

Gods of stone,
But gave up in derision.
We have paired life to the bone

And squat now
In the firelight reading
Gibbon and old comics.

Somewhere
The old folks dream on,
Their innocence and purpose
A twig, a leaf
Eddying in brown
Discrepancies of water

While we,
Anemones, receive
On our bare rock

Whatever
Nourishment the wash
Of the waves may bring.

Each object mentioned in the poem has no further use in this life but they persist in physical form. Their obsolescence is a creative and imaginative impulse. We might keep them in mind as disjecta membra,\(^{142}\) as the speaker describes the experience of trying to survive in a marginal, derelict and outmoded place.

Dillon Johnston suggests the poem’s voice is ‘the survivor of an unspecified holocaust’,\(^{143}\) but I think ‘Entropy’ also has to be read in the context of the Troubles. The frame of reference and overall feeling in the poem of a half-rural, half-industrial landscape recalls Belfast, the ‘big house’ recalls the large mansions built by land-owning Protestants. The ‘pyramids’ in the eighth stanza reference another Northern Irish poet, Louis MacNeice, in particular the line ‘We are dying, Egypt, dying’ from ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’\(^ {144}\).

Another intertextual reference to ‘Gibbon’ is likely a reference to the English MP, historian and author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, whose humanistic, teleological approach and his criticism of organised religion runs parallel with Mahon’s liminal and dynamic poetry. The subject matter becomes liminal here in the interstitial sense, as it might refer to two very different cultures, Rome’s growth into an empire and Ireland’s experience of British colonisation. The phrase ‘the wires cut’ signifies not just a severing of the speaker and his survivors from normal life but also the reluctance of Ireland’s different cultural groups to communicate. This failure seems to

\(^{142}\) This is related to Beckett’s use of the term to mean scattered remains, fragments or miscellaneous things in which he talks about ‘the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again [...] the breakdown of the object’. I am referring to Samuel Beckett, 1983, *Disjecta, Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder), p. 70.

\(^{143}\) Johnston, 1985, p. 226.

have led to the wider collapse experienced in the poem. The desultory image people struggling to adjust to a spare, survivalist lifestyle contrast with images of civilized advancement ‘O-levels’ and ‘pyramids’. These lines are also perhaps an ironic, darkly humorous comment on the life of Irish Catholic subjects under Anglo-centric colonial rule.

Although this is now a harsh world, ‘Entropy’ through its restrained, oddly calm and elegiac tone finds this new primitive way of being to be an improvement on what went before. This is a deeply scathing comment on contemporaneous society. The ‘property speculator’ in reality refers to somebody who rebuilds and renovates houses, his symbolic purpose in the poem is linked to Mahon’s rehashing of history and culture through liminal spaces. His failure at ‘O-levels’ adds to this idea as it implies a recklessness, a refusal to follow convention or tow the line. In fact these survivors seem to be proud of their rediscovery of ‘the old methods’ as the speaker defiantly announces their abandonment of the search for a god who might explain and unravel why this entropy has happened.

The post-cultural feel of ‘Entropy’ also functions as a premonition of a doomsday event, the speaker and the people a millenarian group. Tellingly, they ‘squat’ as they read which intones that all literature is only good as bathroom reading. The poem’s failure to find a purpose in more natural sources and its dependence on and relish for random disjecta and fabricated detritus comes across as a further refutation of Seamus Heaney’s poetry in Wintering Out where the emphasis is firmly on the elemental and natural. In the bog poems I mentioned earlier, Heaney in singular detail almost reanimates those individuals; in ‘Entropy’ the people are anonymous and anomalous, the subject matter at the point of elimination, about to disappear rather than being made to reappear. Heaney obsessively names places, people but ‘Entropy’ is characterized by its relative obscurity, as Peter McDonald observes, ‘It would not be unreasonable, however, to read ‘Entropy’ in terms of ‘belonging’ in the ‘far extremity of an unnamed place’. This place may remain unnamed but it is a liminal zone influenced by the Beckettian sense of existentialism, where the deadweight of identity and nation, the command of religion and politics are obliterated and liminal, peripheral and interstitial ideas used to remonstrate against their central place in Northern Irish culture.

145 McDonald, 1997, p. 94.
A further issue that Mahon’s insistence on marginal, abandoned places raises has to do with the appreciation and reception of poets from Northern Ireland and highlights their atypical relationship with identity and nationality. The literary establishment in the Republic of Ireland in the late 1960s may not have fully recognised Northern poetics, but John Goodby’s statement that “The effect of Northern Irish poetry in the Republic, then, has been limited and marginalized by a variety of factors despite the presence of Heaney in the country since 1972,” feels wide of the mark given the obvious influence of Mahon on contemporary Irish poets as varied as Nick Laird, Leontia Flynn, Peter Sirr, Harry Clifton and Eamon Grennan.

‘The old folks’ the poem mentions could refer to the population in the Republic with their rich mythological tradition and ancient Celtic history as opposed to the recent industrialisation in Northern Ireland that has obscured its own historical and mythological connections. Revealingly they ‘dream on’ in contrast to the nightmarish situation in the poem. They are also ‘innocent’ and have ‘purpose’ whereas, the poem seems to say, Northern Ireland’s population is wracked with guilt and their violent behaviour ultimately meaningless. This complexity and lack of understanding of Northern Ireland is heightened by the ‘brown / Discrepancies of water’. Northern Irish identity is an oblique, abstruse thing; this image doesn’t suggest fresh, clear water but muddy puddles and stagnating, out of the way channels.

The poem’s speaker refers to himself and the others as ‘Anemonies’, an anemone being a flowering plant that clusters together, perhaps reminiscent of the emerging school of poetry in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. The casual way that the word ‘Whatever’ occupies its own line conveys the speaker’s resigned, existential attitude and also that the people have no choice in what they ‘receive’. Northern Irish poets at that time too awaited erratic instances of recognition.

Derek Mahon has always distanced himself Belfast Group, the circle of poets connected through their attendance at workshops held at the lecturer Philip Hobsbaum’s house in that city. Despite his physical distance, Mahon’s correspondence with Michael Longley

played a key role in both poets’ early development.\(^{147}\) ‘Entropy’\(’s\) ‘bare rock’ may be comparable with Northern Ireland in that it is a peripheral, isolated and littoral place, yet the poem’s locale remains an anonymous outcrop where culture has become a trivial irrelevance. The inhabitants of the landscape in ‘Entropy’ are paradoxically under threat of being overwhelmed by the ‘wash of the waves’ yet also reliant on them. ‘Entropy’ through its stark repression contrasts with the arbitrary, wild deviations and disorientating variousness in the collection’s title poem ‘Lives’.

Both poems exemplify Derek Mahon’s retreat to marginal recesses and subjects, away from historically established centres, since this is where historical pressure, identity and nationality are most powerfully felt and the significance of the Northern Irish poet achieves its greatest clarity. James Simmons reviewing ‘Lives’ in *Fortnight* in June 1972 comments on the collection’s Northern Irish dimensions.\(^{148}\)

Simmons is right to mention the collection’s lack of ‘obvious’ or direct reference to the Troubles, but Mahon’s working method in *Lives* deliberately resists and challenges these events through the use of apocalyptic ideas and detritus. This imaginative re-alignment of the Troubles is a defining feature in the poetry produced at this time. Mahon’s Northern Irish contemporaries, Paul Muldoon and Michael Longley, have dealt with the Troubles and reimagined that era in their own poetic spaces. Muldoon has traced the historical impact of liminality in Irish poetry. In *To Ireland, I* (2000), Muldoon mentions Amergin the early Irish poet-warrior, as being central to the establishment of Irish identity and nascent liminality saying, ‘[…] I take as my theme not only Amergin’s magical powers of transformation but his essential liminality […] poised on the threshold of victory’. For Muldoon this is a key moment in ‘a variety of strategies devised by a range of Irish writers for dealing with the ideas of liminality and narthecality that are central, I think, to the Irish experience.’\(^{149}\) Muldoon’s statement accentuates the deeply unstable and questionable nature of the political geography of Ireland and the poetry produced there;


\(^{148}\) James Simmons, ‘Living in London’, in *Fortnight*, No. 41 (Jun. 8, 1972), p. 16. ‘The cavalier poet’s wry formality with humble matters, tempered by much reading of Beckett and O’Nolan […] he dwells much on the end of the world or of civilization […] The confrontation with Ulster themes isn’t very obvious. One about the poet in times of violence seems sensible enough but somehow not worthy of its subject. ‘As It Should Be’ is a nicely bloody minded anti-terrorist poem […]’.

narthecality means to be on or around the edges of something and is closely related to the peripheral.

Muldoon’s own poems from *New Weather* (1973) conjure imagined accounts of Native Americans, as in the poem ‘The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi’¹⁵⁰ that intones ‘In the Moon / Of Frost in the Tepees, / There were two stars / That got free’, and bases its refrain on the traditional Native American lunar calendar. In ‘The Indians on Alcatraz’ the same subject matter is interlaced with contemporary American history as the speaker tells us, ‘It is as if they are decided / To be islanders at heart, / As if this island / Has forever been the destination / Of all those dwindling bands.’¹⁵¹ Muldoon looks to an island, its modern prison Alcatraz which is a liminal, in-between place, as a means to stage his imagining of a much older people. Muldoon mentions the word ‘transformation’, a word that we can associate with the shifts that Ireland has undergone in its occupation by different peoples through history. Northern Irish poets show a considerable interest in literary transformation through the use of imaginative space.

Michael Longley’s responses to the same political and religious problems that affect Mahon’s *Lives* and Muldoon’s *New Weather* often find their source in the natural world, elegy, classical myth and islands. *An Exploded View* (1973) includes poems such as ‘Lares’¹⁵² a sequence that plays on the idea of the Roman guardian deities, or ‘The Island’¹⁵³ where, ‘We can walk in a day around the island. / We shall reach the horizon and disappear’. The three-part poem ‘Alibis’¹⁵⁴ has its speaker trying out different identities, ‘I wanted this to be a lengthy meditation / With myself as the central character – Official guide through the tall pavilion / Or even the saviour of damaged birds.’ Longley then, in these different guises, also sees the importance of finding an individual way to approach the same cultural dilemma as Mahon, liminality manifests itself in Longley’s use of peripheral natural places.

Longley establishes a more direct link to Mahon in the poem ‘To Derek Mahon’, part of the sequence ‘Letters’¹⁵⁵ in the same collection. Longley refers to himself and Mahon as,

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‘Two Sisyphuses come to budge / The sticks and stone of an old grudge’. I’m not sure if ‘budge’ is the best word to describe Mahon’s relationship with the Troubles here, since many of Mahon’s poems make the point that cultural differences can’t be moved aside, so integral are they within Northern Irish culture.

Other poems included in Lives such as ‘Edvard Munch’, in which ‘The deal table would make for the window, / The ranged crockery freak and wail’, or the sonnet ‘A Tolerable Wisdom’ with its ‘frozen dodgems in the amusement park, / one crumpled Gauloise touting for a lift / where Paris flamed on the defining dark’, may be difficult to associate with Northern Ireland. But both poems channel Mahon’s Europeanism and his desire to see beyond cultural fixity through the contingency. The former references the Norwegian artist Munch, and the latter uses Francophone proper nouns. Both poems identify with cultures outside Northern Ireland, putting themselves and the reader to sea in a poetry that is mutable, adventitious and imbued with possibility. Elsewhere in the collection, in poems such as ‘Ecclesiastes’, ‘Gipsies Revisited’, ‘Beyond Howth Head’ and ‘As It Should Be’ the Irish context of the Troubles is much more present. But this is part of Mahon’s catechizing approach where a complex, discomforting situation is filtered through the imagined and liminal poetic space. This is a deliberate attempt to counter deep-rooted cultural beliefs that are imaginatively and intellectually suppressing and assert the importance of the individual over the group mentality.

Liminality means to be in-between cultural fixity or on the margins of it. The poems I have discussed from Lives are interested in both senses of the idea. They seem to exist in what Rui Carvalho Homem has identified as “the liminal moment”: the self is faced with an awareness of a divide, a passage, a space of transit; such awareness is promptly followed by a sense of indefiniteness. The sensitivity to a divide is obviously present in Mahon’s poems. A ‘liminal moment’, however, feels too temporary and insubstantial for what I believe he is trying to create through his use of the concept. Mahon seeks out spaces, objects and ideas that counterpoint and oppose the fixity and absolutism of

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156 Mahon, 1972, p. 4.
158 Ibid, p. 3
159 Ibid, p. 29
160 Ibid, p. 33
161 Ibid, p. 25
politics, religion and the discourses spilling from these. A liminal space then, seems the most appropriate term to explain how these poems try to build up a resistance to and problematise the Troubles. Space has a continuous existence, it is adaptable and transformative. The poems’ speakers introduce and submit whichever objects, spaces and ideas they see fit in their existentially alert investigation of the individual, or selfhood under the terms of their Northern Irish cultural conditions. In the following chapter I want to think about the continuation and equal importance of Mahon’s strategic use of liminality in five poems from *The Snow Party.*
Chapter 2: *The Snow Party* (1975)

In chapter one I discussed Derek Mahon’s deliberate use of liminality through interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas, subject matter and locations in *Lives* (1972), writing these ideas into the poems and simultaneously acknowledging, through scepticism and hopeless irony, the inevitable failure of such ideas. This is a poetic and imaginative strategy that counters the tribal and puritanical, political and religious agendas prevalent in Northern Irish culture during the late 1960s and early 1970s by proposing a positive liminal alternative. Here, I wish to continue exploring this idea by suggesting ways in which Mahon’s poems in *The Snow Party* (1975)\(^{163}\) similarly seek to agitate, unbalance and dismantle the fixity of cultural attitudes in Northern Ireland at this time.

Claire Wills has noted how the construction of modern Northern Ireland has been marked by ‘overinvested identities.’\(^{164}\) *The Snow Party* is incited by a crisis in the face of these imposed, or superimposed identities. It can be read as an antithesis to the feeling of confinement and immobility issuing from these. Unlike *Lives*, also informed by and recoiling against that intense public crisis,\(^{165}\) the crisis in this volume is not mirrored and prompted by immediate public unrest. Rather, it originates in a personal dilemma arising from an existential alienation from Unionist Protestantism and Mahon’s distancing himself in a locational sense from cultural and social disaster. Mahon’s poems are detached and turn away from any accepted and historically established form of identity. An existential awareness of renewed possibilities opens up through liminality, edgy spaces and fissures, offering a way out of hegemonic structure.

*The Snow Party*, Mahon’s third full collection of poems, appeared three years after *Lives*. I want to consider the collection as the second part of a two-book project where Mahon responds to the Troubles. These poems, through an intellectual, aesthetic and outward looking, explorative stance problematise his Northern Irish, Protestant inheritance. By close reading five key poems I will demonstrate Mahon’s refutation of and objection to cultural fixity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In my analysis of ‘Afterlives’ (p.1) I want

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\(^{163}\) Derek Mahon, 1975, *The Snow Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). All of Derek Mahon’s poems discussed in this chapter, unless stated otherwise, can be found in this volume.


to show how the poem accentuates the duality and concurrence of place, poised between Belfast and London. I will also mention how the title of the poem and its position as the collection’s opening poem provides a clear feeling that this volume forms a pair with Lives. In my reading of ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ (p.9) I will emphasise the liminal framing of communality and detachment from community to explore the discordant, antagonistic and exasperated relationship between these. In my exploration of ‘A Hermit’ (p.26) I will pursue Mahon’s use of a littoral location, the peripheral, desolate setting and the poem’s ironic, atheistic play on traditional hermit poetry, a tradition that normally expresses Christian religious devotion through the beautification of nature. In my interpretation of ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ (p. 27) I will show how Mahon’s use of waste objects within a derelict landscape is another manifestation of liminality. In my final reading of ‘A Disused Shed in County Wexford’ (p.36) I will explain how liminal ideas are embedded and exploited through the disparate nature of the poem’s subject matter and its varying engagement with place. I also want to briefly discuss the postcolonial and postnational dimensions of this poem.

It is useful here to consider Colin Graham’s reading of Northern Ireland as occupying a liminal, discursive space within the fields of postcolonialism and Irish Studies. Graham mentions postcolonialism to emphasise the inherently contested and unsettled character of Northern Ireland, noting how it belongs to ‘the “liminal spaces” of colonial discourse, marginal areas, where the ultimate opposition of coloniser and colonised breaks down through irony, imitation and subversion.’\(^{166}\) A major paradox here is that the political and religious ownership of Northern Ireland is deeply contested, yet those same beliefs in the same country are so strongly ingrained. This is mirrored by the often contradictory and intentionally liminal ideas that Mahon strategically writes into these poems. It is this sense of the Troubles that emerges in the The Snow Party. Northern Irish identity, due to the turbulent history of the place, is a complex problem, but attitudes towards it always follow predictable positions.

Mahon’s relationship to a hegemonic identity or subjectivity, normally based on traditional cultural factors, is deliberately disruptive. An important point will be to show how he actively chooses a liminal outlook as a rebellion against, or rebuff to fixed ideals

and beliefs. In doing so I also want to reflect on Benedict Anderson’s observation that ‘Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity […] engenders the need for a narrative of identity.’ In their restless approach to identity, history and place, these poems represent a disturbance and agitation of this continuity.

Victor Turner’s idea of ‘rites de passage’ also grows out of a concern with continuity and the individual’s going outside cultural norms into a state that where new and unexpected inferences can be made about their origins and speculation is able to happen. Therefore it prompts a certain way of thinking about liminality in Mahon’s poetry:

we must regard the period of margin or “liminality” as an interstructural situation […] Rites de Passage are found in all societies […] such rites indicate and constitute transitions between states. By “state” I mean here “a relatively fixed or stable condition” […] Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence.

Turner’s theory defines liminality as a destabilising, unsettling locus where flux and change are more strongly felt than the fixity and stability of normal cultural and social spheres. Individuals within this phase are both in-between and marginal to authorised and accepted cultural beliefs and positions, whether these are physical, a job for instance, or ideological, as is the case with religion and politics. The individual sees their culture from new angles and opens it up to fresh scrutiny. Turner’s mentioning ‘factors of existence’ translates here to a real concern with transience, temporariness and disappearance. In Mahon’s poems these ideas are associated with a movement between places, histories and cultures. Henri Bergson in his lecture ‘The Perception of Change’ commented that ‘in a movement, it is not the change of position which interests us, it is the positions themselves […] We need immobility, and the more we succeed in imagining movement as coinciding with the immobilities of the points of space through which it passes, the better we think we understand it.’ Mahon too is aware of our general reliance on immobility to interpret the world and produce creative works from it; consequently his fluid, transient and mobile poems are both metaphysically and

existentially concerned with his being in the world, the specific experience of a particular
time over others.

Following this it is useful to consider Albert Camus’ idea that ‘To create beauty, [one]
must simultaneously reject reality and exalt certain of its aspects. Art disputes reality but
does not hide from it’. It is in this same spirit of rebellion against the ideologies
imposed by culture, which has more power and influence than the individual, that
Mahon’s poems operate. Mahon resists the exclusionary tribal pull in poems that use
edgy zones, or apertures, to enact an ironic criticism of the Troubles and a prescribed
identity. Because of this aesthetic fixation on marginal and interstitial zones Mahon has
sometimes been treated by critics as a cosmopolitan outsider, distanced from his
Northern Protestant background. His poems ironically incorporate ‘cosmopolitan’ or
cultured material and ideas that distort Mahon’s own clear sense of culpability in
Northern Irish issues. The realisation that in his public role as a writer he has inculcated
himself in that place’s contested politics and religion is also ironised.

Here, I would like to offer some contextual and biographical background on The Snow
Party. In 1971 Mahon moved from Belfast and Dublin where he had been teaching, to
London, where he worked as theatre critic for The Listener and briefly in advertising. Here
he also set to work on The Snow Party. Hugh Haughton points out that ‘During the years
Mahon wrote these new poems he continued to live the precarious life of a free-
lance journalist, based first in a Kensington flat, in West London, then in a country retreat at
Ford Manor in Lingfield, Surrey.’ ‘Precarious’ is a loaded word for The Snow Party.

Turner’s liminal phase is inherently precarious, occurring as individuals pass between
states, that is to say it is transitional and interstitial. Mahon’s own movement from
Northern Ireland to England was a transitional phase for his personal life and career.
This departure also coincided with a violently transitional period in Northern Ireland.

The first poem in The Snow Party, ‘Afterlives’, uses a two-part structure. The first section
is set in London and the second on a ferry arriving back in Belfast. This poem provides,
in its position at the opening of the collection, the sense of a stereoscopic and interstitial

goes on to list some of Mahon’s journalistic work such as: ‘Features Editor for Vogue (where, according to
him, he was the worst dressed member of their staff), ’writing the “serious” bits between the clothes’.
perspective on Ireland and England and immediately establishes a direct sense of continuity with the prior collection Lives. Mahon’s speaker, physically and symbolically, is framed between two shores, in transit. In ‘Afterlives’ there is an obvious duality being set up between London and Belfast. Haughton uses the word ‘bilocated’ to describe this poem,173 which simplifies things, suggesting Mahon only focuses on one place at a time. In-fact both places are viewed in opposition and parallel.

The poem opens with the speaker waking in his London flat. First appearances show that all seems to be calm. The almost incidental details provided in this carefully modulated sestet stanza also create an impression of anxiousness about starting anew following a period of turmoil:

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I wake in a dark flat
To the soft roar of the world.
Pigeons neck on the white
Roofs as I draw the curtains
And look out over London
Rain-fresh in the morning light.
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This is our element, the bright
Reason on which we rely
For the long term solutions.
The orators yap, and guns
Go off in the back street;
But the faith does not die […]
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That in our time these things
Will amaze the literate children
In their non-sectarian schools
And the dark places be
Ablaze with love and poetry
When the power of good prevails.
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What middle-class cunts we are
To imagine for one second
That our privileged ideals
Are divine wisdom, and the dim
Forms that kneel at noon
In the city not ourselves.
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Although Mahon expresses an alienation and detachment from the Northern Irish Protestant community and the violence associated with it, the Troubles figures in a wider historical view of world events. Richard Kearney observes that ‘The ruined cityscape of Belfast continues to haunt his imagination,’ and ‘Afterlives’ can’t help but superimpose one capital over another, even though the initial, superficial impression in the poem is one of an undisturbed, idyllic urban existence. The singling out of details common to any place, rather than sites more unique to London warns us that the speaker’s reprieve from that chaotic time in Northern Ireland may be short-lived. The ‘soft roar’ refers to rush hour traffic but it also implies that the explosions, gunfire and riots of the troubles are at a distance but still in the speaker’s thoughts. The phrase ‘rain-fresh’ shows London starting up again for a new day with the speaker, who sees the city as clean and bright. Mahon’s own familiarity with the dirt, rubble and bloodshed of the Troubles informs the speaker’s seeming surprise and assuagement at this striking and picturesque view.

The first three stanzas of this section use two half rhymes or assonances based around the end word of their lines. In the fourth stanza the rhyme disappears. The phrase ‘middle class cunts’ has a bearing on this. The poem grows impatient, frustrated by its own middle class poesie. Mahon’s speaker is ironically well aware of his liability regarding idealism and self-importance. He seems balanced though, amidst the dilemma of place and identity. To be in your ‘element’ is to be comfortable and completely at home. He looks towards clear-headed, unbiased understanding through ‘reason’ and for ‘long term solutions’. But then comes an abrupt intrusion of ‘orators’ and ‘guns’. ‘Reason’ and ‘long term solutions’ are two typical clichés often repeated by politicians and officials in public office, ‘orators’ in other words. Such cliché and calls to arms were very much in evidence during the early 1970s in Northern Ireland. ‘Guns’ are simply the final recourse when speech fails to convince and turns to violence.

The initial association of these phrases with freedom from party-politics and religious piety is confused and shattered by politically charged words. Both irony and this dual meaning (that mirrors the tension concerning duality of place in the poem) can be found in the second stanza’s final line. This could be taken either as a positive declaration of hope based on a fresh start in a fresh city, or as a tired cry that the religion and politics, root causes of the Troubles and the speaker’s self-imposed exile in London can’t be so

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easily forgotten. Stan Smith reads this poem as a premonition of the future rather than a reverberation from the past, stating ‘Anticipation is converted into a peculiar kind of dispossession and nostalgia for an already absconded reality.’ Really, the key point is that the poem’s stereoscopic interests are heavily invested in liminality and interstitiality as it simultaneously revisits the past and looks forward. The speaker at his window feels on the edge, the perimeter of London and peripheral to Belfast. His later movement to a position, in-between these cities, deepens the poem’s reliance on liminal thinking.

The opening two stanzas create the impression of the immediate moments after waking. The speaker’s memories, displaced in sleep, begin to reassert themselves as he looks out of the window. The flat is ‘dark’ because the curtains are yet to be drawn, but also because memories of dark times loom large. The ‘soft roar of the world’ unintentionally harasses that part of the speaker’s mind where he has internalised and tried to lock away the memories of those experiences. London fades into the background of the poem as they play on a visual loop in the speaker’s mind. ‘Afterlives’ two parts are poised liminally between Belfast and London, and the first part of the poem is caught liminally in-between the severely different kinds of experience, existentially speaking, that the speaker has in these two cities.

The closing two stanzas of the first part of ‘Afterlives’ focus on Belfast. In the third stanza the speaker seems to wish the ‘orators’, ‘guns’ and ‘faith’ out of existence in an enjambment of the final line of the previous stanza. The speaker’s positive enforcement of liminality, interstitiality and peripherality urges these things to become souvenirs or strange remnants. This ironic statement appears to remember Belfast as a backwards wasteland, a cultural void awaiting the establishment of an enlightened society. In a further irony, the Belfast that belongs to the ‘orators’, for all its reliance on language and religion is not a literate, enlightened or tolerant place but the exact opposite. London’s comparative civility exposes Belfast’s failings, the primitivism of its violence. Belfast is a place still awaiting a time of civility and gentility and also still stuck in a repetitive and futile cycle of ignorance and conflict.

Belfast in the experience of the poem’s speaker is a wreck, a wasted place of disintegration, stupidity and misguided dissent. The speaker in ‘Afterlives’ would prefer

the Belfast fires to be metaphorical ones caused by ‘love’ and ‘poetry’, rather than the reality of petrol bombs and burning cars. Simplistic or naïve, Mahon’s speaker, hardened by a stint in the no-go areas of Belfast, ironises the hippie sub-culture’s wide-eyed declarations of peace and love. This outlook is perhaps as equally simplistic and stupid in the speaker’s eyes as the logic behind Unionist and Republican rhetoric.

Mahon acknowledges his own standing amongst the ‘middle-class cunts’, having bettered his working class background by establishing a career as a poet and journalist in London. The emphasis on the movement of the voice from the direct, confiding nature of the first person into the more general third person, implies the speaker is complicit in ignorance and prejudicial, sectarian thinking, he knows that he too is a product of Belfast’s back streets. The cosmopolitan liberal ideals in London and the dogmatic, hard-line religious and political ones in Belfast are not God-given. For the atheistic, existential Mahon this is a stark realisation, ideals should not lead to a ‘holier than thou’ attitude to those unlike ourselves. The ‘dim / Forms that kneel at noon’ resemble worshippers stopping for the Angelus. They are also reminiscent of the figures in MacNeice’s poem ‘Belfast’, one of that poet’s most despondent works about his inherited Northern Irishness where religion, politics and violence are irreversibly integrated in the natural and human landscape, ‘Down there at the end of the melancholy lough / Against the lurid sky over the stained water / Where hammers clang murderously on the girders / Like crucifixes the gantries stand.’

Mahon’s peripheral status to the middle-classes complicates this view. These ‘dim / Forms’ might also be a put down of those in a public positions of responsibility enforcing a dominant Protestantism, his cultural inheritance. The poem places the middle-class, affluent and liberal culture of 1970s London where self-expression and individuality were encouraged, side-by-side with the repressive, destitute and conformist nature of Belfast life. Such an intermediary state between classes and cultures in the poem demonstrates that its imaginative space provides an alternative, or an escape from inherited bleakness and despair.

Seamus Deane believes it was Mahon’s intention for ‘Afterlives’ to be read as two self-addressing ‘rebukes’ where ‘liberal hedonism is now confronted by the apparently endless

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violence [...] [the speaker] wonders if staying through the violence would have provided him with the sense of community and of self he has sought elsewhere. Rather than concentrating on the poem’s self-loathing, I think it is important to emphasise the duality of the cultures informing it, the repressive violence and politics that prevailed in Northern Ireland and a more liberal intellectual freedom in London far more conducive to the work of a poet. But as bad as Belfast’s prospects looked at this time, the advent in the early 1970s of such publications as The Honest Ulsterman and Fortnight were a proverbial liberal and intellectual beacon in the dark. Mahon was publishing in first of these magazines at the time and in dialogue with several now prominent figures in the Irish literary world, Simmons himself of course, but also Edna and Michael Longley. So, Belfast’s cultural situation was a lot better than some historical sources portray it, although it was not as liberal as London.

Deane inevitably brings up the subject of community and place, wondering if Mahon is trying to find a sense of belonging. More than this, Mahon’s edginess and peripherality question and expose the familiarity of established cultural affiliations. Although the first part of the poem opens with the suggestion of having found a home from home, this is soon discounted and antagonised by the contested nature of place in the poem. The violence that Deane supposes Mahon has escaped continues to haunt the poet’s imaginative life in a fetishistic way seemingly echoing Derrida’s idea that ‘the mystical character of the fetish, in the mark it leaves on the experience of the religious, is first of all a ghostly character’; violence, we might say, lives on in its own afterlife but frequently ghosts the text. Deane also wants to make Northern Irish poets and poetry representative of that community. Mahon is intensely resistant to this and prefers to view local and parochial developments from a position of distance, outside the cultural centre and the extreme forces at work there, countering one extreme by having the speaker located at another.

The second part of ‘Afterlives’ has the poem’s speaker returning to Belfast after a long absence:

179 Haughton, 2007, p. 94.
I am going home by sea  
For the first time in years.  
Somebody thumbs a guitar  
On the dark deck, while a gull  
Dreams at the masthead,  
The moon-splashed waves exult.

At dawn the ship trembles, turns  
In a wide arc to back  
Shuddering up the grey lough  
Past lightship and buoy,  
Slipway and dry dock  
Where a naked bulb burns;

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

But 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.

The speaker has yet to reach home. The transition of this journey reaffirms Victor Turner’s reasoning that such transitions are *rites de passage*, both liminal and interstitial. Turner refers to this as ‘a becoming’ and Mahon’s poems in their search for alternative possibilities to the restrictive opinions of the Troubles are also this, working out their own logic and reason for existence as they unfold. His poems do not itch after fixity, rather fluidity and possibility. This is reflected in a similar rhyme scheme to the first part, based around half or slant rhyme and assonances. The glottally end words ‘back’, ‘lough’ and ‘dock’ lend a particularly Gaelic sound. Their glottal stops contrast with the soft, smoothed out vowels of ‘same’ and ‘home’ in the final stanza. Two allusions are apparent in this part. Its first line takes us back to Mahon’s debut collection *Night-Crossing* (1968), as here we are presented with another ferry journey by night. The second line of the third stanza clearly alludes to the end of Yeats’ ‘Easter 1916’, ‘Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born.’

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The ship ‘shudders’, replicating the speaker’s own natural reaction as he reaches Northern Irish soil. The speaker also notices the ‘lightship’ and the ‘buoy’, solitary and detached objects used as navigational aids. These objects are aptly representative of Mahon’s own detachment from Northern Ireland and the irony of their functioning as guides for boats is not lost on him. The boats on the lough know where to look for sure and certain light and direction. But where is Mahon to look without resorting to the failsafe of established political and religious narratives of identity? The answer is to edgy places, ideas and subject matter and to build an interstitial ethos into these poems.

Clearly, there is a great sense of unease surrounding this problem and the nervousness or trepidation in the stanza is emphasised by the speaker noticing a ‘naked bulb’ which directs us to a certain vulnerability, he finds himself unguarded upon returning to Belfast. A naked bulb is also hot to the touch, so this bulb represents the risky guiding light offered by religion and politics that can just as easily harm as provide clarity. Or perhaps the bulb is intended to represent an image of the ‘starving artist’ who burns temporarily bright. But Mahon’s deep-seated irony cannot be overlooked here, the poem’s insistence that the speaker is innocent in this cultural dilemma only disguises and diverts the reader from his unavoidable implication in Northern Irish politics and religion.

A self-consciousness about leaving Belfast feeds into a wider sense of the flight of the city’s educated Protestant middle classes during the Troubles. Jonathan Stevenson interviews an ex-Harland and Wolff docker in his book We Wrecked the Place who laments:

“The middle class didn’t say anything. The problem is that we’ve lost the talents from that community […] At the end of the day, basically you need those academic classes. But the middle class, particularly on the Protestant side, all pissed off.”

Mahon knows that he ‘pissed off’ too, but in ‘Afterlives’ attempts to address that failing by at least saying something about Northern Ireland’s dire situation, even though its investment in liminal ideas runs counter to the main dialogue taking place in the province. Seamus Deane has recognised the aesthetic tensions arising from ‘historical crisis’ intruding on the practice of Northern Irish poets, saying ‘The latent notion that poetry is in some sense pure and history a contaminating force lends a good deal of

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183 Jonathan Stevenson, 1996, We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating an End to the Northern Irish Troubles (NY; London: Free Press), p. 78.
pathos to the figure of the artist in a time of historical crisis.\(^{184}\) Mahon acknowledges that although historical experience remains a private one for many people, his career as a poet forces his own private crisis to become public. Mahon’s own life becomes caught between two roles, the private citizen and the public poetic persona. This open acknowledgement is in direct contrast to the ‘middle class cunts’ of the first part who are, for the most part, ‘dim’ and fail to recognise even themselves.

In his movement between classes Mahon’s own life became transitional and liminal. This is also central to the pursuit of imaginative freedom where limiting, vested identities are jettisoned in the tolerant and defiantly unconventional liminal space. The liberal intellectual life Mahon found in academia wrestles with his residual sense and remembrance of working class life. We might relate this to Jean Luc Nancy’s proposition that ‘An experience is first of all the encounter with an actual given, or rather, in a less simply positive vocabulary, it is the testing of something real.’\(^{185}\) The Snow Party as a whole is a project that tests the conditions of Mahon’s reality, the ‘given’, by invoking and provoking that experience of the world. Mahon’s use of irregular rhymes and relatively short lines evokes the initial sense of coming into consciousness, of being fluidly aware of one’s surroundings both internally and externally.

Mahon’s early life was informed by Belfast’s continued economic downturn and the growing political tension that led to the Troubles as he found himself in-between two classes.\(^{186}\) The first of these was the working class Protestant majority where ‘Because of the pronounced class division and superimposed lack of social mobility, the Protestant ethic in Northern Ireland acquired an acquiescent anti-intellectual dimension.’\(^{187}\) It is this lack of intellect that Mahon’s eloquent poetry of in-between and threshold ideas pushes against. The second would have been the city’s disengaged middle-classes who, ‘Being

\(^{184}\) Deane, 1985, p. 163.  
\(^{186}\) Maurice Goldring, 1991, Belfast: From Loyalty to Rebellion (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.), p. 39. Once prosperous, the resulting high levels of unemployment in Belfast, Goldring argues, exacerbated tensions between different factions/classes in the city, ‘High unemployment is a social disaster wherever it occurs, but its effects are much worse in Belfast because it made ethnic rivalries so acute.’\(^{186}\) Mahon’s The Snow Party is acutely aware of this sort of ‘social disaster’. ‘Afterlives’ violent imagery and the political hue of its language hint at collapse. But the idea of society as a disaster area, as I will show in ‘A Hermit’, comes across even more keenly in those poems that obviously use as their location a dilapidated wasteland found in-between community and isolation.  
\(^{187}\) Stevenson, 1996, p. 76.
isolated by choice […] apprehended the troubles with detached bemusement." Mahon’s poetry also deals with this middle-class aloofness and indifference. His poems acknowledge both social groups’ failings as Mahon recognises these faults in himself.

This kind of scene is evident in ‘Afterlives’, though the wasteland is held off by the urban veneer of civilisation in the two cities mentioned by the poem. In ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ however, reality is further suspended and dispatched. The poem’s first four stanzas, spoken in the first person, inform us straightforwardly of the speaker’s wish to disappear from an unidentified community:

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.

This is the future tense, the speaker ‘wants’ to do these things. The poem’s reality, revealed later, is that he is trapped in a hostile community. There is much uncertainty in the final line of the fourth stanza. That declaration seems to put a distance between the speaker and the actual languages that have a significant role in the territorialising of Ulster, English and Gaelic. This line also alludes to the speaker’s future contentment once language is permanently eradicated and he becomes totally ignorant of the religious and political recriminations and arguments often made through it.

The speaker is also looking for an escape route from history and to abate its presence, the stress it imposes on his existence. The poem is another version of tactical liminality: its imagined scenario has its king looking for alterity to actual history and religious and political narratives. The speaker’s existence in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ falls between a

188 Stevenson, 1996, p. 77.
place that is wholly reliant on linear history as defined by fixed cultural narratives and
one that constitutes an imaginative vacuum, he exists in a fissure indebted to liminal
thought. In a strange reversal of real world events, in the world of this poem the people
terrorise and impose their own totalitarian principles upon the ruler. The ‘fire king’
impresses on the reader his unease at being forced by his own people to assume the
position as ruler and figurehead for absolutist agendas. It has made him suicidal. The
poem suggests that the masses force the creation of an elite that governs political and
religious attitudes rather than this being the naturally pre-eminent state.

‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ contains very paradoxical and ironic elements. The speaker
is a ‘fire king’, but is this in our monarchical sense, or is this an ironic moniker he has
given himself that ties in with his desire to take flight and ‘break with tradition’? Mahon’s
ironic attitude must be kept in mind at all times when reading this volume. Perhaps he
refers to the ancient kings of Ulster. This would channel Northern Ireland’s protracted
history of uprisings and territorial contest. Benedict Kiely grasps one of the central
dilemmas for Mahon here asking ‘Now what and where exactly is Ulster? The meaning
of the name has a great deal to do with the complications of the controversy.’ A
question that naturally follows this is what is a Northern Irish poet and where do they
belong? This takes historical precedence over Northern Irish issues since Ulster has been
acknowledged as a place for much longer, Northern Ireland only coming into being
following the Partition of Ireland, following the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. To
that question there may be no satisfactory answer. Mahon doesn’t attempt to wrest some
solution to the current crisis in the ancient past in his poetry, and ‘The Last of the Fire
Kings’ makes no claim to ‘historical validity’. What the poem provokes are ideas of
instability and fluctuation between potential points of origin: Ireland, ancient and
modern Ulster itself, Britain and Europe. From its ancient origins and the establishment
of the High Kings in the seventh century A.D., through to comparatively recent history
in the Tudor conquest of Ireland and The Plantation of Ulster, then events in the
twentieth century – civil war, partition and in Mahon’s time the Troubles (all triggered
largely by the struggle for independence and home rule during the late nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries) – Northern Ireland has been claimed and discarded, reclaimed
and discarded again. This poem is extremely alert to this problematic history:

Either way I am
Through with history –
Who lives by the sword

Dies by he sword.
Last of the fire kings, I shall
Break with tradition and

Die by my own hand
Rather than perpetuate
The barbarous cycle.

Eamon Grennan raises an important point, playing on Seamus Deane’s awareness of Mahon’s poems as a form of individual expression when faced with the more oppressive and daunting nature of their collective historical context. This deep-seated individuality has an important function in Mahon’s reluctance to follow established ‘narratives of identity’:

Whether these poems have an invented persona or speak in the voice of the poet himself, their speech is consistently a value opposed to the values of historical circumstance. In careful, polite tones, the speaker in “The Last of the Fire Kings” informs us he is “through with history.” He would pass to a new world, “Not knowing a word of the language.” In its deliberate patience, its poise and lucidity of syntax, his speech opposes that noisy world of “Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked up windows” from which he turns.190

The speaker has a restless impatience not ‘deliberate patience’. Grennan might have emphasised further the poem’s oppositional qualities that grow out of its imagined liminal space. The ‘fire king’ exists in a fatally transitional state designed to interrogate and trouble cultural fixity by highlighting the repetitious nature of political and religious discourse, Mahon places more value in the incertitude, doubt and rootlessness that come with deliberately going outside historical narratives. The king will remain inside the poem however, to meet his inevitable end. Impatience grows out of a desire for a liminal, marginal, edgy place ‘out of time’ and an inability to find satisfactory resolutions to the tension between belonging and not belonging. The phrase refers to his desire to step outside history, but in an apocalyptic play on words could also mean that time has run out. The poem, through its doubts about inherited culture’s paramount role in the individual’s life, also brings up the issue of the sacred and the profane. These were potent

terms during the Troubles, to speak negatively about one’s own tribe, a revered and sacrosanct thing for many, was taboo and blasphemous.

The repetition of the word ‘die’ is a sign of impending doom and is also ironically suggestive of an imaginative and spiritual death at the hands of totalitarian ideals. The speaker in a shocked moment of self-realisation becomes aware of the time he has wasted, the anxiety that defines him. His ‘cold dream’ suggests a cold sweat or the dream being a distant possibility rather than a plausible reality. This is shown through the insomnia of the ‘fire king, his apprehensive stalking this territory in the daytime, fretting about being overthrown or assassinated:

Five years I have reigned
During which time
I have lain awake each night

And prowled by day
In the sacred grove
For fear of the usurper,

Perfecting my cold dream
Of a place out of time,
A palace of porcelain

Where the frugivorous
Inheritors recline
In their rich fabrics
Far from the sea.

The ‘sacred grove’ serves as a metaphor for Northern Ireland. The North is sacred because of the Catholic and Protestant beliefs imprinted and forced upon that landmass. But the phrase also offers a tired, ironic appraisal of sacrosanct attitudes. ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ serves as an ironic frame for Mahon’s own upbringing and residence in that unique ‘grove’. Samuel Beckett’s influence is apparent here. If Mahon acknowledges the significance of his being Northern Irish, then he sets those provincial origins against an appreciation of a more cosmopolitan European culture. Liminal spaces are a positive solution for Mahon to the troubles of cultural exclusionism, but he is also aware of the irony that these zones must also necessarily be a place of scepticism and apocalyptic gloom. Adrienne Janus speaks of ‘The liminality of being caught in a feed-back loop of reception and transmission, between the murmurs of past voices not entirely absent and
the babble of presences which do not yet have a language in which to speak’, and like *Lives*, many of the poems in *The Snow Party* are ciphers that channel Beckett’s nihilistic existential philosophical approach. The ‘palace of porcelain’ may also reference Beckett’s occasional dalliances with toilet humour. Terence Brown has also written on Beckett’s debt to James Joyce’s cultural world-view mentioning how:

In Ireland a few young intellectuals, mostly graduates of University College, though the most famous of them, Samuel Beckett, was a graduate of Trinity College, were conscious of Joyce’s genius and reputation, indeed some of them sought his acquaintance in Paris. They recognized in their veneration of Joyce’s work and the European nature of his achievement that Irish cultural provincialism could only be redeemed if a proper concern with nationality was combined with an acceptance of the riches of European culture.

Mahon’s Europeanism owes a similar debt to Beckett. This is shown through the exotic phrasing, ‘palace of porcelain’, ‘frugivorous inheritors’, ‘rich fabrics’. Beckett allows Mahon to get past a restricted provincial mindset, or set of images and lexicon, to show richness in his poetry. This is ironic due to the sparsity of much of Beckett’s vocabulary and of the settings he employs. Although Beckett was born in Dublin into a well-off, middle-class family and Mahon in working-class Belfast, Mahon shows a clear aesthetic and intellectual empathy for Beckett’s dual perspective on Ireland and Europe that he learned from James Joyce.

Mahon’s allusion in these delicate images, or phrases, implies an image of enlightened European decadence, refinement, sophistication and intellect, which contrasts with more unrefined Northern Irish objects. ‘Frugivorous’ defined as ‘fruit eating’ also recalls the Garden of Eden. Ironically, we might liken the temptation of Adam and Eve into sin by eating from the Tree of Knowledge with the temptations of modern day religious piety. This image implies an inevitable fall. Mahon adopts a liminal position to critique the religious and political short-sightedness of his homeland:

But the fire-loving
People, rightly perhaps,
Will not countenance this,

Demanding that I inhabit,

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Like them, a world of sirens,
Bin lids and bricked-up windows –

Not to release them
From the ancient curse
But to die their creature and be happy.

Clearly the speaker feels hemmed in by inherited cultural paradigms, he is the creation of the ‘fire-loving people’ who make particular demands upon him. This mirrors the cultural conflict of the Troubles and the complexities and anxiety of this period are likened to an ‘ancient curse’. There is the sense of the speaker’s homeland ineluctably pulling him back. The populace and the ‘fire-king’ cannot offload their inherited historical and cultural baggage. The poem instead re-orientates around liminal, intermediary, tangential ideas, places and subjects, embraces its own indefiniteness and contingency to resist and challenge cultural constancy. The political and religious attitudes and violence of the Troubles are countered by the poem’s suggestive imagery and phrasing.

This conflict with the traditional cultural centre will ultimately kill the speaker. He has to be ‘happy’ with this outcome in the colloquial, fatalistic sense, trapped in an oppressive, claustrophobic world. The more European, cosmopolitan outlook is repressed and stamped out, and so too will the speaker be. He would escape to the margins but cannot due to their forthrightness and so only establishes his own liminality amongst them. The poem’s liminal zone is its figure’s last stop before he is wiped out of existence. Happiness may also relate to the final closure that both the devout and the non-believer expects in death. These contentious issues may come back to haunt the speaker even after death, in his final judgement before God. What if he has believed too little, or not at all, and similarly what if he has believed in the wrong thing too much? Mahon presents us with a futile existential crisis that cannot be resolved. For Hugh Haughton “The poem invites us to see escape as a respectable imperative, given his murderous culture.” It is these divided and extreme beliefs that are the source of the poem’s faith-based problem. Escape may be the only reasonable answer, but the ‘fire king’ has not yet managed it.

Dillon Johnston recognises that Mahon feels similarly trapped by historical circumstance writing that ‘The Belfast battlescape establishes grounds for arguing that Mahon’s “ancient curse” is more malign than Stephen Dedalus’s “nightmare,” to which Mahon

alludes in “The Apotheosis of Tins.”¹⁹⁴ The populace don’t seek ‘release’, they are content to be oblivious, but Mahon and his ‘fire king’ see other alternatives too clearly. These arise from the continued imaginative influence of ravaged Belfast. Terence Brown observes that ‘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 [...]’.¹⁹⁵ It is ironic that Mahon’s uprootedness from Belfast can only be achieved by the continual imaginative prevalence of Belfast. Eammon Hughes discusses Mahon’s relationship with place mentioning ‘the debate about the centrality or marginality of place in Mahon’s poetry.’¹⁹⁶ This poem encompasses both marginality and centrality. The ‘fire king’ rules an imagined space but dwindles into insignificance when faced with a much larger, merciless cultural and historical scope.

Unlike “The Last of the Fire Kings” identical, measured stanzas the prose poem ‘A Hermit’¹⁹⁷ does not use stanzas in a traditional sense, comprising two paragraphs of eleven and seven lines. I will refer to these as stanzas to keep to recognisable poetic terminology. Mahon’s choice of a prose poem contrasts with the skilful craftsmanship and elegant expression of the hermit poems common in early-Christian Ireland. These poems tended to be short and affecting, so the clinically direct delivery of Mahon’s sentences, the mass and density of his blocky text go against this. Mahon is more comfortable with a lyrical, well shaped stanza in poems such as ‘Afterlives’, ‘The Snow Party’¹⁹⁸ and ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ as they do not engage directly with religious or political material, preferring to obliquely and ironically comment on those issues. ‘A Hermit’ also has a sense of irony, undermining and creating tension with those ancient poems through its atheistic leanings and interest in a spoiled nature. This results in a skewed hermit poem. Miles Dillon elaborates on this poetic tradition:

Gerard Murphy who in an article in Studies in 1928 wrote of the love of nature and of animals that marks the accounts we have of early Irish Saints and hermits. St. Adamnan’s Vita Sancti Columbae, written in the seventh century, contains incidents which recall the Fioretti; and the spirit of the early Franciscans...

¹⁹⁷ The full text of this poem can be found in the appendix.
¹⁹⁸ Mahon, 1975, p. 8. This poem is not included for close analysis here, but uses the same three line stanza as ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’.
was, in a measure, anticipated in Ireland. It seems that this awareness of the whole of creation as the work of God – a delight in the forms and sounds which are an occasion for praising and thanking the Providence which gave them – is the source of much of the nature poetry. [...] And there is the other motif, that of the hermitage, solitude which brings one nearer to nature, the sound of the waves, the wind amongst the reeds, the seagull’s cry. [...] The hermit poetry leads us on to the poetry of exile. 199

Whereas traditional hermit poetry is devout and sincere in its belief that nature is God’s work then, Mahon’s poem presents an atheistic existential experience of the same phenomena through its ‘scepticism’. In its negation of phenomena normally associated with spirituality, ‘the stars in the mud’, the poem is anti-spiritual calls into question religion and the hermit’s life. Mahon’s speaker is not a true hermit, he seems to resist or contradict all the things that hermits would define themselves through: solitude, a vow of silence, a devout belief in God and a view that nature is intrinsically beautiful.

The poem allows for the fact that its hermit has a very close connection to nature, but also supposes that an unwavering devotion to God and a belief in His creation of the universe is pointless. This is no Christian hermit-mystic and the poem’s tone hints at an existential crisis. Nature too is not as pleasurable as true hermit poetry and the poem makes fun of and ironically mocks hermit poetry. We cannot consider its speaker an actual hermit since he has no problem visiting populous places. Rather we should look at the hermit as an exiled figure who has a liminal relationship with history. He might be an escapee from the Troubles. But he might also be a universal refugee from history and modernism. His is a kind of urban, enlightened hermitage in the way the speaker distrusts God; his isolation is spoilt by the encroachment of an urban area and its by-products onto the idyllic site of the hermitage. Nature is not overwhelmed by the municipal, it is abundant and in close proximity. The language of the poem is poised between the sincerity found in original hermit poetry and a modern irony, and between a peopled place and the solitude of an isolated one. Hermitages are sites of contemplation and Mahon’s speaker contemplates his own place between two time-periods, the aftermath of the troubles in Northern Ireland is measured against the idealism of those early hermit poems.

‘A Hermit’ is also representative of Mahon’s fascination with wasted, derelict areas and detritus, with its ‘shambles’ and ‘stinking shore’ coupled with rarefied images of natural beauty. Here we can see the influence of the periphery again, through the poem’s littoral setting and all its festering accoutrements. Mahon revels in this scene of isolation and gradual disintegration, this liminally suspended moment where the greater, angry cultural forces of his time hold no sway. In this way, through its subject matter and form, it can be paired with ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’, another prose poem. The form of the poem also reflects Mahon’s interest in detritus and the periphery. Here, lyrical, stanzaic form is binned and replaced by pure text, on the very edge of what traditionally would be considered poetic and lyrical.

The poem’s speaker is a prescient and eloquent consignment of tin cans. Here Mahon’s appreciation of wasteland and rubbish is brought into sharper focus. If the hermit in ‘A Hermit’ is in-between religion and secularism, the inhabited and uninhabited world, then the tins in ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ are in-between the position of outright rubbish and objet d’art. Their actual physical location too, in an interstitial area, fits in with Seamus Deane’s observation that ‘The struggle between community and wasteland which consumes much of Mahon’s writing is not resolved in favour of either.’ This lack of resolution points us once again to the in-between nature of the tin cans’ situation. They reside in a sewage outflow pipe close to a beach, a littoral location, but the human world is nearby. The sewer is referred to as a way of bringing attention to the effluent bandied around as belief, in Mahon’s opinion, in extreme cultural conflicts such as the Troubles. The cans experience a moment of existential realisation, they reside at the limits of the human world and their inhabitation of this place seems limitless. This recalls Emmanuel Levinas’ reflection that ‘vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of this interminable return, this aperion, maintaining oneself before this semblance of nothingness which is the void, and approaching objects as though at their origin, out of nothingness.’ Through a singling out of discarded individual objects left to disappear into nothingness the poem negotiates an uncultured interest in disjecta or rubbish and a more refined aestheticising of these insignificant objects.

200 ‘The full text of this poem can be found in the appendix.
The poem balances heightened sensation and imminent extinction, permanence and impermanence. Tensions form around Mahon’s working-class background in Belfast, with its lack of intellectual opportunity, and his new found life in liberal, comfortably middle class London. Its ‘sour smudge on the horizon’ comments on the scorched, semi-distant Belfast. Here the labelling of religion and politics in that city hang in the balance through an ‘erosion of labels’, which comically also encompasses the labels on the cans. Mahon’s interest in brand names here in his referencing Windowlene echoes Louis MacNeice. Windowlene cleans but also whitens-out windows, so it represents perhaps an obscured view of such things as identity and nationality. This is emphasised by the phrase ‘terminal democracy’ and its associations with something coming to an end or death. Mahon’s poems continually reach terminal states, positions or locations, he is the supreme aesthetician of this kind of setting and tone.

The ‘smudge’ in the poem is analogous to pollution emanating from the factories and shipyards of industrial Belfast. This is an ugly image at odds with the articulacy of the poem. Mahon’s experience of a working-class industrial world makes itself manifest here, as John Goodby asserts, ‘Anti-utilitarianism has obvious relevance to Mahon’s perception of his background, whose more philistine aspects confirm his interests in l’art brut as much as l’art pour l’art. ’ The poem confirms Mahon’s distance from Northern Irish literary circles. Mahon aestheticises the utilitarian landscape of Belfast and its utilitarian, immobile religious and political beliefs where fixed and definite versions of events take precedence. ‘An Apotheosis of Tins’ both reverses and revises this process, finding a rough beauty in transience, fluidity and a society in decay, conveying this in the poem’s impressively learned ironic language. This is ironic because supposedly civilised society is crumbling, yet inarticulate disposable things are becoming rapidly more alert and sensitive.

The irony in a host of intellectual tin cans speaking to us in the third person relates to the anti-intellectualism amongst Belfast’s Protestant working classes in the early 1970s. If Mahon as the poet is the tins’ creator and imaginative beginning, then they can only live and interact with us because of his anxiety and alienation from his culture. This is evident

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203 Brown, 1974, p. 115. In his essay ‘MacNeice in England and Ireland’ Mahon mentions, when he quotes ‘Autumn Journal’ and its naming of Johnnie Walker whisky, that MacNeice was perhaps the first poet to make use of liberal references to brand names in his poetry.

in the very MacNeiceian phrase ‘the flux of sensation and crisis’. The erosion and gradual wasting away of the tin cans is contrasted with the steadfast faith that society places in the ‘permanence’ of cultural inheritance. For Mahon, this littoral and marginal location is a perfect setting to establish liminal conditions, where cultural factions and institutions based on their historical and mythic legacies can be problematised and dismantled.

The poem’s insistence on urban detritus and disjecta sets it apart from other modes of Irish writing where the concern is with rural, not urban, origins. Seamus Heaney offers a bucolic Catholic perspective on the same historical period focusing on natural and organic subject matter. Given his minority status as a Catholic in Northern Ireland, Heaney actually seeks to establish and probe deep roots in that landscape. Mahon’s poetry in contrast is defined by its shifting, flighty style. Heaney’s *North* (1975), published in the same year as Mahon’s *The Snow Party* shows, even through its title, the kind of rooted, direct and historically embedded poetry Heaney was writing at the time.

The collection includes poems such as ‘Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication’ about the farm Heaney grew up on; ‘North’ a poem reading Northern Ireland and its chequered history through other geographically northern places and peoples. It also incorporates ‘Bog Queen’ and ‘The Grauballe Man’, two poems about ancient bog bodies discovered on Denmark’s Jutland peninsula. These poems look away from Northern Ireland through their subject matter, but we also find Heaney compulsively digging down and unearthing things. ‘Act of Union’, another poem from that collection, openly references the political process between Britain and Ireland. Although Heaney looks to Denmark, rather than Northern Ireland in those bog poems, the subject matter is buried, planted and has a definite sense of place. These poems represent the kind of subject matter that Philip Hobsbaum describes as ‘a kind of pastoral’. *The Snow Party* takes flight from these in liminal, interstitial and peripheral modulations, and has intense anxieties around definition. Both poets, though they take opposite approaches, deal with the myth of place and the tribal pull of their respective clans. Even Heaney succumbs to paradox in his attempt to escape Ireland via ancient bog people, being drawn home in comparing these bog bodies to victims of the Troubles.


The reference to ‘mackerel’ at the beginning of ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ draws our attention to the ‘mackerel crowded seas’ of W.B. Yeats’ poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. Yeats’ exotic reference to ‘Byzantium’ directs us to look away from the current cultural conditions and consider that city as representative of the ephemerality of places and objects. Mahon’s ‘An Apotheosis of Tins’ is a reboot of that idea. ‘Cavafy’, another poem from The Snow Party, is also attuned to the transience of civilisations through its interest in the ruins of the near East and the titular author’s transmission of that past.

The cans buckle and erode under the weight and strain of taking the place of history. The language of the poem, with its absurdly comic phrases deepens the sense of intimidation brought about by this substitution. The setting of Mahon’s poem is not specified, the tin cans exist in a liminal, interstitial vacuum, place remains indeterminate. The feeling is that this liminal area, the ‘terminal democracy’, is the point of no return for the tins, one gust of wind too strong, one big wave and they disappear, wiped out of history forever.

‘An Apotheosis of Tins’ also undermines the highly formal stanzas of Yeats’ poem. Whereas Yeats’ poem combines identical octets and a regular rhyme scheme, Mahon’s poem is written in two paragraphs of prose, there is no attempt at rhyme and the only moderation of the language’s rhythm come from the sentences themselves. The shape of the poem is governed by its two paragraphs which amount to a rejection of the nationalistic, overtly political outlook that Mahon perhaps sees installed in the big Yeatsian stanza. The use of two paragraphs instead is his formal method of opting out of that debate. Mahon has subsequently revised these poems by breaking the paragraph form up into traditional stanzas reminiscent of Yeats’ style. In his Collected Poems (1999) both this poem and ‘A Hermit’ under its new title ‘The Mayo Tao’ appear in their reconfigured format.

The tin cans in their marginal position mirror the liminal status of Northern Ireland that Colin Graham identifies. They possess an inherent instability, they might remain in this same spot for years to come or be suddenly washed out to sea, another case of Mahon’s apocalyptic sensibility. The cans seem to intuitively know how important ‘the value of self-definition’ becomes when in this kind of precarious situation and when two nations vie for the occupation of a territory. They are also instinctively guarded against anyone

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208 Mahon, 1975, p. 18.
who passes by. This calls to mind nineteenth century attempts to define Ireland and the identity of its inhabitants through cartography by both the British colonisers and the Irish themselves. It is my feeling that Mahon’s own inner cartographer is driven towards liminal, interstitial ideas and areas to resist contemporary attempts to define Northern Ireland’s cultural and geographical limitations.

Mahon’s cartographic interests push his poems to the brink and the fringes and this poem’s final line diverts the tins’ resistance, being sited in such a zone, onto Northern Ireland and Mahon himself. It ironically dismisses nation builders and the resultant constructed identities and cultures by having its subjects poised on the brink of destruction. It also serves as a metaphor for post-Troubles Northern Ireland. Mahon, through the in-betweeness of his poetic outlook and his relocation in London amongst the bourgeois middle class, has left behind the literal destruction of his own country. However the Troubles remain with Mahon in an imaginative sense, through the poem’s literary reinterpretation of Northern Ireland as a liminal, spasmodic and contingent wasteland. Those earlier attempts to modernise seem to have come to nothing when confronted with the Troubles that had such an obviously historically rooted cause. A great irony here is in Mahon’s suggestion that supposedly modern and civilised cultures could actually learn anything from tin cans.

The concluding poem in *The Snow Party* is ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’. This is Derek Mahon’s most famous poem and his reputation as a major figure in Northern Irish poetry of this period rests on it to a degree. The poem relates to us in six sturdy, ten line stanzas the plight of ‘a thousand mushrooms’ who have been locked inside the ‘disused shed’ of the title and abandoned there, victims of time and history. These stanzas are in stark opposition to the prose exercises of ‘A Hermit’ and ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ and also resolutely different to the arterial form of those poems discussed at the start of this chapter. This adoption of a larger, formal stanza signifies an aesthetic breakthrough for Mahon’s that pre-empts his next book *The Hunt By Night* (1982) where

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210 Jim MacLaughlin, 2001, *Reimagining the Nation State: The Contested Terrains of Nation Building* (London: Pluto Press), p. 228. ‘Certainly in nineteenth-century Ireland cartography and the collection of statistics on a whole range of natural, social and physical phenomena equipped nation-builders with the means whereby they could ‘imagine’ and literally ‘visualise’ the modern Irish nation for the first time […] to see it as a forward looking political community, not just a backward looking historical and cultural community.’

211 The full text of this poem can be found in the appendix.
this shape is frequently used, signalling the conclusion of the two-part project consisting of *Lives* and *The Snow Party*.

Firstly I will consider how the poem’s liminal, marginal subject matter bears directly on its relationship to the Troubles. I will then look at the role of place in the poem. Victor Turner states that as well as having a transitional status liminal entities are also in a state of suspension. This belief is important in the way the mushrooms have been pushed aside through their being trapped in the ‘disused shed’, in suspended animation. This is one form of marginalisation. Edna Longley writes perceptively about the formal aspects of ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ and in doing so brings up the subject of marginality:

> ‘The mushrooms weirdly preserved in the shed ‘since Civil War days’ ‘have learnt patience and silence / listening to the crows querulous in the high wood’. This is another image of poetry-in-waiting, of latent articulation on the margin of history. Or is it the discords of history, onomatopoeically symbolised by the crows and ‘the gravel-crunching, interminable departure / of the expropriated mycologist’, that are truly marginal?’

It seems strange that Longley asks a highly suggestive question about this poem but doesn’t adequately answer it. The poem presses home its own investment in the marginal place. Identity and cultural allegiance are awkward, overwhelming things that trouble the poem’s speaker as he tries to work through them and establish a dialectic through which he can come to understand the world. The poem’s insistence on a wider cultural and international frame of reference asserts that identity and belonging are informed by a wider sense of history and world events, by transnationalism. Gayatri Spivak writes that ‘destabilisation follows the lines of the old imperialisms’ and what happens in this poem is Mahon’s own destabilisation of imperialistic and nationalistic ideas that influence Northern Irish writing. This is brought about by the use of liminality’s embracing, outward focus. It provides a way for the poem to bring a welcome relativist and humanistic perspective to the Troubles. Consequently, Northern Ireland’s problems are brought into perspective and seem to diminish when compared to the historical narratives of other countries and cultures and the transience of these places and events. The poem causes a disruption and unsettling of Benedict Anderson’s ‘narrative of identity’.

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The first stanza establishes the marginal, desolate and derelict location before introducing the mushrooms themselves. It suggests time passing incredibly slowly and the general area is overgrown. To add a deathliness to the atmosphere there are ‘lime crevices behind rippling rainbarrels’, lime, amongst its other uses such as whitewash and in the treatment of sewage, is often used in burials to speed up decomposition. The impression is of abandonment and decay. It is ironic that mushrooms grow in darkness and muck. They represent Northern Ireland’s jaded, destructive religious and political opinions. Sean O’Brien has written that this poem ‘takes weary facts – death, decay, fear, solitude – and reanimates them for the reader’s contemplation.’

That reanimation is enacted through the haunting, ghostly mushrooms where history once again ghosts Mahon’s poetry. They exist in limbo, half alive and half dead. I would add abandon to O’Brien’s list of nouns and give this issue precedence. Although trapped in a traumatic situation they still possess potentiality, as the poem’s first line indicates. It is this potential in the liminal space, its suitability as an imaginative, redactory outlet for new ideas and thinking, opposed to the standing still and confinement of cultural fixity, that Mahon is most invested in. It is both ironic and perhaps inevitable that he should choose such a claustrophobic setting for the poem. The mushrooms have been isolated and sidelined from the real world where time is passing and history being enacted. They are marginalised, removed from history and are obviously keen to give an account of their experience. There are two more ironies here: appealing to the lost people of a death camp and a destroyed city will not help relate their experiences and these experiences in the shed are also insignificant since all they have done is spend time concentrating on very mundane things.

Paradoxically the poem sidesteps direct engagement with important political issues such as nationalism through its marginal subject matter, which is unusual and not what one might expect when first presented with the poem. Mahon’s issue is with the discrimination inherent in cultural directives, he presents the mushrooms as both subject and object of history, removed from it but expectant of its return, using waste ground, extraneous and contingent subject matter to put an end to dominant, provincial cultural forces. Richard Kirkland observes that this poem ‘bears a sense of a communal history

yet can be read as paradigmatic in its failure to become epic’. Mahon is courting this kind of Beckettian ‘failure’ through the use of highly formal stanzas and the undermining of this structure with unusual and unexpected marginal subject matter.

The ‘mushrooms’ are being gradually brought towards history, from darkness into light, as they are on the brink of being discovered. ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ engages with issues such as nationality but not directly, instead mundane and commonplace images take the place and bear the weight that these heavy issues normally carry. The reference to ‘Co Wexford’ in the poem’s title also implies a dimension that applies particularly to the Republic of Ireland. The ‘flash bulb firing squad’ of the fifth stanza represents increased media attention upon Northern Ireland. These minor details are intruded on by a more universal image when the shed’s ‘keyhole’ becomes ‘the one star in their firmament.’ We might relate Northern Ireland and the shed to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave here, as Jerzy Jarniewicz does.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas the subject matter seems to buckle under the weight of historically formed and culturally accepted notions of identity. The political and religious tone of some of the individual nouns stresses its ominous presence. The adjectives paired with these nouns accent the mushrooms’ dread and agony. On top of this is a sense of overall darkening inside the shed. Their jostling for ‘Elbow room!’ tells us they long to escape this marginalisation. There is a pun here that links Mahon once more to MacNeice, the Elbow Room being a pub that MacNeice frequented on the Dublin Road when he was in Belfast.

The mushrooms might represent the tribal call of Mahon’s Protestant Northern Irish kin. The fact that they are ‘wordless’ reflects on the mediation of the tribal spokesperson or representative as well as anti-intellectualism. This idea is reinforced as the mushrooms only seem able to express themselves through the language of conflict, coming across as malnourished, neglected prisoners of war. A paradox is evident here. Mushrooms are

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218 Johnston, 1985, p. 204.
nourished and thrive in dark conditions and Mahon is aware that the darkness that has descended on Northern Ireland is replicated in the shed. Seamus Deane recognises that the mushrooms ‘[…] seek to escape from the brutality of a dark, instinctive and lethal struggle into the light of recognition. Mahon has here inverted his usual procedure. The lost lives are not lived beyond history, but before it. Their fulfilment is in history.’

Over this I would emphasise the Derridian idea of hauntology, the feeling that history ghosts or shadows the poem, that the past moment, the present moment and the future moment all inform one another. An impressive range of places is referred to in ‘A Disused Shed in County Wexford’. The poem’s journeying nature and deliberate interpolation of itself amongst far-flung locales is another way that it pushes away the dangerous cultural absolutisms of the Troubles. Haughton correctly notices the direct influence of Seferis’ Mythistorama and the Odyssey. In both works the underworld is a threshold, marginal place where voices from the past have an accumulated volume. These references also tie the poem into another Greek influenced poem in this collection, ‘Cavafy’, where ‘In this city of homecomings / Where all voyages end / There is no way out.’ The Troubles and Northern Ireland have to figure as an ineluctable form of entrapment and a line of demarcation. All roads lead back there. The transnational nature of the voice in ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ means it is in-between disparate and evocative points but this sense of ironic inevitability remains as a more extensively historical agitation and anxiety is instilled in the poem. This brings the specifically Northern Irish problem of the Troubles into sharp relief. It is achieved through the obliqueness and ambiguity of these references, rather than clarity. Its locations are designed to counteract or provide an antidote to the prevailing belief that the Northern Irish Protestant imagination is dismal, colourless and can’t see beyond its own bleakness. The mobility and migrating nature of Mahon’s imaginative process asserts a more informed cultural view based on relativism and humanist thinking, although this only further unsettles the certainties of nationalist movements in culture. The use of such places may lend new shades and tones to the poem but they only deepen the complications around the Troubles.

219 Deane, 1985, p. 163.
221 Mahon, 1975, p. 18
222 Gerald Dawe, 1993, A Real Life Elsewhere (Belfast: Lagan Press), p. 66. ‘The further twist in this distorted and distorting process of identity is the way the Protestant community in the north of Ireland is seen as an introverted, imaginatively dull and uncreative source for an artist or writer.’
However, as imaginatively varied and colourfully global as such places are, the irony is that these ‘places where a thought might grow’ will forever be associated with the catastrophic events that occurred there. This is an obvious contradiction since Mahon seems to suggest that a better future might emerge from catastrophe. Liminal imaginative spaces might simply be a prelude to a more positive future, one not defined by or subservient to old ideals. The positive dimension of the poem’s breezy declarative opening statement is offset by the grim potential of its places. Suffering and despair are permanently etched into their histories, so whilst purporting to lighten and inform Northern Irish outlooks through its global reach, the poem contradictorily darkens the Northern Irish imagination.

The shed and its disparate places are marginal, waste spaces that press liminality on the reader. Dillon Johnston comments on Mahon’s eye being drawn to such spaces:

Mahon extends the tradition of those Irish exiles – Joyce and Beckett – whose writing elevates character and place, or setting, over history and ideology, particularly the Irish version of history. Goaded by a killing Irish rectitude, they reject political formulations about humanity and find man most human amongst the waste spaces.223

But this is about more than just exile. These waste places free people from the alienating constraints of identity. Ironically it is only through stepping away from a place and establishing a critical distance that it becomes possible to appreciate people as individuals rather than members of a particular group.

For Mahon the liminal sphere is the site of imaginative life and a highly productive creativity in relation to the cultural dilemmas resurrected by the Troubles. This poem provides a distanced space out of the reach of the two Northern Irish communities. Its mushrooms are exiles without having to go anywhere, but Mahon’s exilic mindset, that wants to avoid cultural classification, must seek out new imaginative space. This relates to his subjects’ desire to return to culture and history, as Jarniewicz states ‘the mushrooms should have been content to live in this perfectly Mahonian place, cut off from the meaningless noise of the world, the accumulating junk of civilisation, but they

are not. As products of Mahon’s imagination the mushrooms do not necessarily have to come into contact with cultural obduracy, Mahon however is dogged by the problem.

In the concluding lines the mushrooms seem to call out to a passing photographer who might also be an exile or a curious tourist. His ‘light meter’ is a pun on poetic form and the breezy, casual delivery of this poem that actually contends with serious cultural issues. Stan Smith mentions this writing ‘Only the itinerant tourist’s ‘flash-bulb firing squad’, in the words of ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’, restores the ‘feverish forms’ of the actual, ‘Grown beyond nature now’, to a human world in which they have meaning.” Their fate is left hanging in the poem, the figure’s discovery is merely suggested. Smith’s conclusion is too definite. The abandonment and desertion of the mushrooms may not be over so easily. The poem might also be taken as an act of witness, an approach related to Heaney’s bog poems, although Mahon’s variation uses irony and a dark wit, in contrast to Heaney’s gravitas and exactness.

Is the unsuspecting passerby about to stumble on a chance find, a mass grave, or walk straight past oblivious? Importantly, like concentration camp internees or relics awaiting discovery by archaeologists or amateur metal detectors, mushrooms are organisms that exist on, or in, a threshold. Fungi grows in the damp, which is in-between wet and dry, prefer half-light to brightness or pitch dark. In the poem these imaginary fungi exist in-between time periods, one reality and another, imperceptibility and perceptibility. The poem tries to suppress the tribal cry of the mushrooms yet they strain ever closer to the moment of their release, when their voices will be deafening and overpowering. Hugh Haughton emphasises the poem’s relationship to civil war, the inevitable culmination of such ideological cries:

Mahon’s poem rewrites Seferis’s revision of the Homeric descent into the land of the dead, recasting it in the unlikely theatre of the disused shed (and to my ear ‘A Disused Shed’ contains a blurred resemblance to ‘Odysseus’s Shed’). What might have been a mock-heroic idea, however, develops into an extraordinary visionary meditation in time of civil war.

Certainly, the shed is in a sense a gateway or entry point to an underworld that this passerby, like Odysseus in Homer’s epic poem The Odyssey, could choose to enter. A

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226 Haughton, 2007, p.118.
more appropriate suggestion for this figure is that of a poet. After all, poets, like photographers, create images. This one seems to have a particular interest in marginal and derelict locations. He is not really a liminal figure, but a conduit recording details and passing them on. Through the introduction of a human figure into a place that is singled out in the poem because of its having been abandoned by humanity, ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ may well represent the empathetic human qualities that Johnston notices these waste spaces bring to the surface. Unplanned and divergent, the movement of the speaker from place to place is in search of human empathy when faced with the disturbing site of the mushrooms, like inmates in a death camp. The speaker is suggestive of Mahon’s own exile in London. This is paralleled in the exiled state of the mushrooms in ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ although their exile is not voluntary, as Mahon’s was, and it is an internal exile. Where Mahon perhaps sees himself as turning a blind eye to the problems in his homeland, this poem does focus on suffering, but it is the suffering of fungi, not human beings. The Troubles must be read into this due to the poem’s dedication to the novelist J.G Farrell, author of the novel Troubles (1970). Mahon’s use of fungal subject matter however makes the allusion oblique. Despite this obscurity, fungus is an invasive growth and Mahon’s poem is more than aware that the conflict over identity and ideology in Northern Ireland is very much like a disease or an invasive irritation and could easily be likened to fungus. In a desperate paradox, the earth that once nourished the mushrooms at some prior point is now used to bury their dead.

In ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ Mahon is mindful of the representative status that weighs down Northern Irish writers, conscious of his origins and his privileged position as a poet. It is through a flight to the liminal, the interstitial, the margins and the periphery, represented here through the use of an abandoned shed full of trapped mushrooms, that he escapes this pressure exerted by the cultural and tribal centre. This is similar to Heaney’s use of archaeological discoveries on the Jutland peninsula. If Heaney excavates the symbolic and aesthetic potential of the turfcutter’s trove then Mahon reclaims and embraces the liminal space, its desolate, derelict and detritus strewn wasteground, with all its ensuing ambiguities and uncertainties. These places are where the impact and sheer power of history and culture are most keenly felt, but it is also where they can be most fervently rejected and dismantled. The irony, wit, dark humour and play of his poetry does not impact on or lessen the sense of responsibility to a liminal, edgy and inclusive outlook in these poems that runs counter and seeks to
counteract political and religious idealisms that are flagrantly isolationist and authoritarian.

Finally, the liminality of Mahon’s poems is reflected in this collection’s title poem ‘The Snow Party’ where in its description of the titular event ‘everyone / Crowds to the window / To watch the falling snow’, whereas, ‘Elsewhere they are burning / Witches and heretics’. This pleasing reference might be to snow, representing a peaceful, shared cultural experience, but the snow could also be a metaphor for ash and the fallout of conflict. The next line is ugly, preferring to use an image that might refer to both sides’ animosity and distrust towards each other during the Troubles and also to deep internal tribal instincts to enter into conflict. However, this is always done through the veil of different historical periods and events: the middle ages in Europe and Edo period Japan. Mahon is unwilling to allow his poems to be read purely through the lens of Northern Ireland, the problems in that place are only representative of a feeling of loss, waste and devastation that is universally historical. This wider perspective situates the Troubles within a larger consideration of historical trauma and catastrophe. The poem’s sudden juxtaposition though, an image of great aesthetic pleasure turning to one of horror draws us back to Louis MacNeice, whose own poem ‘Snow’ intones ‘The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window / Spawning snow and pink roses against it / Soundlessly collateral and incompatible’. In ‘The Snow Party’ richness and poverty, creation and disaster run parallel and remind us of the way that specifically Northern Irish forms of identity in Mahon’s poems are disturbed by the application of a liminal imaginative space. From the margins and in-between the defining terms of the Troubles, these spaces deliberately and effectively allow Mahon to antagonise and provoke religious or political fixity and established cultural attitudes, but they are also the source of great anxiety around history, politics and religion and their implications on culture.

So, characterised by their unstable, shifting nature and growing out of the contested geographical, political and physical space of Northern Ireland, these poems directly challenge ‘the idea that there is only one true Irishness and that this depends on a stable and secure relationship to place,’ as Catherine Nash writes. Stability and continuity

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227 Mahon, 1975, p. 8.
both imply an ever-present template for defining how one should fit in and belong in Northern Ireland. *The Snow Party* reanalyses and re-contextualises the way a Northern Irish Protestant like Mahon should view himself in a particularly Irish ‘narrative’. The title of the collection *The Snow Party* actually works as a double pun relating to the groupings that contend for ownership of this narrative. It might refer to a party (political or otherwise) made up of snow, the most transient meteorological phenomena. It also suggests a lack of revelry, there’s no party. This interest in transience grows from a feeling of alienation and detachment from both culture and community, but also in Mahon’s realisation of his own tribe’s expectation of the poet, as a learned spokesperson, that he confront and speak out about political and religious differences. This is a not a comfortable position for him, and this discomfort is expressed in the movement of the poems to sites that are in-between or on the margins, the way that they skirt the edges of culture and community through liminal ideas, places and subject matter.
A Hermit

I have abandoned the dream kitchens for a low fire and a prescriptive literature of the spirit. A storm snores on the desolate sea. The nearest shop is four miles away. When I walk there through the shambles of the morning for tea and firelighters, the mountain paces me in a snow-lit silence. My days are spent in conversation with stags and blackbirds; at night fox and badger gather at my door. I have stood for hours watching a salmon doze in the tea-gold dark, for weeks watching a spider weave in a pale light, for months listening to the sob story of a stone on the road – the best, most monotonous sob story I have ever heard.

I am an expert on frost crystals and the silence of crickets, a confidant of the stinking shore, the stars in the mud. There is an immanence in these things which drives me, despite my scepticism, almost to the point of speech. Like sunlight cleaving the lake mist at morning, or when tepid water runs cold at last from the tap. I have been working for years on a four-line poem about the life of a leaf. I think it may come out right this winter.
The Apotheosis of Tins

Having spent the night in a sewer of precognition, consoled by moon-glow, air-chuckle, and the retarded pathos of mackerel, we wake among shoelaces and white wood to a raw wind and the cries of gulls. Deprived of use, we are safe now from the historical nightmare, and may give our attention to at last to things of the spirit, noticing for example the consanguinity of sand and stone, how they are thicker than water. This is the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab, of hock and Windowlene. It is always rush hour. If we have learnt one thing from our desertion by the sour smudge on the horizon, from the erosion of labels, it is the value of self-definition. No-one, not even the pensioner whose shadow strains above us after dawn and before dusk, will have our trust. We resist your patronage, your reflective leisure.

Promoted artifacts by the dereliction of our creator, and greater now than the sum of his skills, we shall be with you while there are beaches. Imperishable by-products of the perishable will, we shall lie like skulls in the hands of soliloquists. The longest queues in the science museum will form at our last homes saying, think now, what an organic relation of art to life in the dawn of time, what saintly devotion to the notion of permanence in the flux of sensation and crisis, perhaps we can learn from them.
A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford

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 rainbarrels,
Dog corners for shit burials;
And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford

Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel,
Among the bathtubs and the washbasins
A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star.
What should they do there but desire?
So many days beyond the rhododendrons
With the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud,
They have learnt patience and silence
Listening to the crows querulous in the high wood.

They have been waiting for us in a foetor of
Vegetable sweat since civil war days,
Since the gravel-crunching, interminable departure
Of the expropriated mycologist.
He never came back, and light since then
Is a keyhole rusting gently after rain.
Spiders have spun, flies dusted to mildew,
And once a day, perhaps, they have heard something –
A trickle of masonry, a shout from the blue
Or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane.

There have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking
Into the earth that nourished it;
And nightmares, born of these and the grim
Dominion of stale air and rank moisture.
Those nearest the door growing strong –
‘Elbow room! Elbow room!’
The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
Utensils and broken flower-pots, groaning
For their deliverance, have been so long
Expectant that there is left only the posture.

A half century, without visitors, in the dark –
Poor preparation for the cracking lock
And creak of hinges. Magi, moonmen,
Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by drought
And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
At the flashbulb firing squad we wake them with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for worms,
They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith.

They are begging us you see in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak on 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.
You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
Let not our naïve labours have been in vain.
Conclusion: Mahon and the Individual Voice

In the previous two chapters I have demonstrated, through the analysis of several important poems from *Lives* and *The Snow Party*, how Mahon’s strategic use of liminality is fundamental to the understanding and interpretation of his poetry from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The cultural context, the beginning of the Troubles, providing the necessary pressure under which these vital poems were written, is also highly important in expressing why liminality is such an important poetic resource and strategy for Mahon. Both collections contribute to a distinctive phase in his poetry, spanning the two volumes, where liminal ideas and zones are the defining factors contributing to the individuality of Mahon’s voice. To close I want to consider the historical and creative context of this point in time in Mahon’s poetic career, the implications and consequences of the Troubles on these poems. I also want to briefly discuss the new generation of Northern Irish poetry that emerged at this time and how the distinctively liminal strategy of Mahon’s poetry set him apart from his peers.

Mahon’s singular voice, his interrogation of sectarianism and communal identity, specifically Unionist Protestantism, through liminality, is evident as early as his debut collection *Night-Crossing* (1968). Already here the poems search for alternatives to the fixed principles of Northern Ireland’s tribal division and had started to formulate and implement liminal ideas; as the speaker of ‘In Belfast’ states, ‘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.’ This is a city that is imaginatively and spiritually desperate, desperate for new ideas and cultural influences as well as desperate in a civic and economic sense with the commencement of the Troubles. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews states that ‘In Belfast’ ‘expresses the poet’s conflicted and ambiguous relationship with his Protestant Ulster origins.’ But Mahon is looking at and contemplating Belfast here, and will end up there, this contradiction defines or characterises his relationship with the city. This place would come to be found in the liminality that distinguishes his poetry.

This voice even more strongly defines *Lives* and *The Snow Party*. It opens up an imaginative place where ideas and thinking around interstitiality, peripherality and

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existentialism can be embraced and implemented. So Lives and The Snow Party expand the
range of liminal ideas as Mahon’s grasp of this concept clarifies and his belief starts to
grow in the potential and potency of this concept and its ability to take on and
significantly challenge the obstinacy and fixity of cultural and communal beliefs during
the Troubles. Undoubtedly, the increasing gravity of this situation only pushed Mahon
further into the exploration and exploitation of liminal ideas. These two books also
represent a break from Mahon’s debut; the big stanzas and highly formal characteristics
of Night-Crossing’s poems make way for a more innovative, individualistic use of form and
subject matter, especially Mahon’s economic and adaptable trimeter stanza.

Undoubtedly, the intense feelings and patriotic ideology that emerged from long-time
Irish efforts towards complete independence and British attempts to retain Northern
Ireland fed into modern political and religious standpoints – Republican Catholic
paramilitaries and subjects who felt politically oppressed by the British government, and
their Unionist Protestant equivalents who wished to remain British citizens. Edward Said
noted the revival of nationalism in Ireland, speaking of the ‘imagination of anti-
imperialism’.233 These kinds of feelings and attempts to imagine or engineer society have
not gone away and contributed to the Troubles as the Catholic population once again
violently opposed British rule.

During the Troubles such sacrosanct positions once again became clearly visible in
Northern Ireland and Mahon’s poetry views these kinds of imaginations and attitudes as
polluted, proposing a separate imaginative space that remains uninfluenced by stultifying,
rift-inducing ideologies, although profoundly aware of their consequences on the
individual mindset. This is in keeping with Kennedy Andrews’ view that ‘In Northern
Ireland, place is the site of division and dispute […] Places are invented – as the
experience of Partition would demonstrate – and territorializing myths and tropes are
used to legitimate identity and secure cultural hegemony.’234 The invention of an
individual, imagined place, such as the one found in Mahon’s poetry, can counteract and
resist cultural uniformity. Mahon’s poetry of the early 1970s interrogates these
legitimising tropes, drastically and subversively re-envisioning the Northern Irish
experience during the Troubles through a variety of liminal, peripheral, interstitial and

Brewer), p. 2.
existential perspectives. The poems in both Lives and The Snow Party can be paradoxical and therefore quite difficult, written as Northern Ireland remained trapped in a Sisyphean cycle of unrest and discord, a culture of reprisal against reprisal. This sense of dilemma and angst issues from Mahon’s personal disassociation from his Protestant Unionist background, but also from the larger historical problem of Northern Ireland’s political and cultural status.

Mahon’s poems prefer to destabilise and unsettle traditional attitudes towards the Unionist Protestantism with which he is familiar, rather than defer to it. Despite their initial intellectual aloofness, his poems are only deceptively impersonal and often linger on the Troubles in a revealing way. This is attained by the interrogation of his religious, political and cultural background, of his own tribal connection (or lack of connection) through the use of liminality, interstitiality, peripherality and existentialist ideas.

Richard Kearney has argued that “The problem of Northern Ireland has proved to be so intractable because two groups of people with significantly conflicting senses of their own national and cultural identity inhabit the same territory,”235 This problem is at the centre of the two collections I have analysed in this thesis. As a Northern Irish Protestant Mahon is aware of expectations of loyalty to the tribe one is born into, yet he is also unwilling to assume this role as evidenced by his perpetuation of liminal, peripheral and interstitial themes. These new and rebellious ideas counteract and challenge the expected norms of his Protestant ancestry. The poetry in Lives and The Snow Party addresses this dilemma of identity and belonging when the individual feels, instead of a strong sense of attachment to the tribe, an intense alienation and anxiety. In Mahon’s case this was induced by the outbreak of the Troubles and an accompanying sense of distress prompted by the shamefully violent actions of his own people. What might be a debilitating influence, a suffocation of the creative life is instead a wellspring, an incentive for Mahon to reach out for a radical imaginative poetic space.

Mahon expresses the claustrophobia of his Protestant lineage and the desolation of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, its ransacked, road-blocked streets and increased unemployment, the pubs and estates, but also fashions poems that extend his cultural understanding. These poems probe Irish literary sources but also reach out to European

and international ideas. Mahon’s subject matter and imagery sometimes feel as if they originate in Ireland and sometimes as if they come from far-flung destinations; biblical references and non-Christian theological influences sit side-by-side; concepts such as existential philosophy and modernism are considered. Liminality and the accompanying sense of the peripheral, the interstitial and existentialism are fundamental to this aesthetic practice of reaching out for an alternative to the immobile groupings during the Troubles.

Edna Longley in her essay “The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon’s Poetry” analyses Mahon’s poetry by way of its innovations in, or adherence to poetic form, instead of the unwieldy subject of religion, or indeed history and place. This essay reminds us how Mahon’s approach to form is highly individualistic, accommodating big, traditional stanzas and innovative, experimental ones. So what takes place in Mahon’s use of novel stanza shapes is a subversion of the traditional stanzaic form used by his predecessors such as W.B Yeats and his contemporaries Heaney and Longley. This liminal attitude to form, destroying traditional stanzas but also innovating within a new stanza shape, is an attack on the danger posed by cultural fixity to the aesthetic, creative and imaginative space. The message appears to be that large stanzas, standardized line length, consistent rhythm and use of rhyme are contaminated by tribalistic, religious and nationalistic sentiments and ideas, exactly the kind of conservatism that Mahon avoids. This is an example perhaps of Mahon claiming specific forms for his own liminal purposes. In the early 1970s Heaney was also using the prose poem as a way of processing the challenge of that time, in his collection *Stations* (1975).

Northern Irish poetry in the early 1970s, especially Mahon’s, despite often pursuing the same problem of heterogeneity within cultural groups, is more individualistic in its intent than the fixed beliefs within those tribal groups would allow. Richard Rankin Russell notes the same cultural oppositions as Kearney but argues that ‘Every Northern Irish poet writing in the last three decades has had to address the conflict in the province’, and it is true that these poets who rose to prominence in the Northern Ireland of the late 1960s and early 1970s responded individualistically to a radically altered social and

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political situation. Although their ultimate aim, to navigate and find an acceptable way of interpreting the Troubles, was quite unified and they used formal poetic elements in a similar way, Mahon’s methodology and poetic practice are especially interesting due to the use of liminality, peripherality and interstitiality; these are defined by a heightened existential apprehension of the sectarianism and disturbances of the Troubles that results in the counteraction of Mahon’s initial feelings of alienation and despair at these negative communal and cultural developments through positive, liminal alternatives.

During this period in Northern Ireland, this was a dangerous, radical and unconventional position to occupy, the majority on both sides simply didn’t think in these terms. Indeed it would have been potentially personally damaging to do so, should one’s own cultural group, Republican-Catholic or Unionist-Protestant, take that person to be disloyal or a traitor to the cause. Despite this, Mahon deliberately and courageously pursues this liminal position, challenging and negating the collective safety of tribal divisions in Northern Ireland. Unlike the imaginative rigidity and intellectual handcuffing of this era’s cultural groupings, liminality proves to be a flexible, freeing thing for Mahon, counteracting and testing the isolating work of nationalistic sentiment. Mahon’s stance of non-affiliation with religion and politics is predicated on the pre-existing beliefs of nationalism, religion and politics. This paradox is apparent in Mahon’s use of liminality, interstitiality and peripherality.

The Northern Irish poets who appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s were influenced by several cultural narratives, such as the native history of Ireland (both Gaelic and Celtic legacies), aspects of the English colonial occupation of the island, how they remapped much of the country and the industrialisation in Belfast and Irish resistance to this, then of course the contemporary, unchanging narratives of modern religion and politics that defined the Troubles. Mahon however also associates, in his reimagining of the Troubles, with disparate cultural sources in Europe and the wider world and religious beliefs and philosophies outside Protestantism and Catholicism such as millenarianism and existentialism. This is not a new solution, but derived from James Joyce’s notion that, ‘No self-respecting person wants to stay in Ireland. Instead he will run from it’. Mahon’s poems are resolutely against staying put, in an imaginative and cultural sense, instead they pursue the interstices and the periphery. The upshot of

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liminality, its interstitial, peripheral and existential ideas in Mahon’s poetry is both an imaginative, cultural, ideological and physical rebellion. This nonconformity has its basis in liminal ideas. The deliberate challenging and representation of Troubles-era Northern Ireland, especially the pursuit of a new set of individual cultural signifiers for the Northern Irish poet and poetry, leads to agitation and volatility instead of an adherence to national, local or parochial concerns and a continuation of a traditionally Irish iconography and historiography. These factors feed into traditional communal and cultural ideas about identity and Mahon makes a deliberate, prescient decision to invalidate and redress them.

As many critics have observed, it is ironic that a blossoming in poetic and creative activity coincided with the Troubles, and that violent sectarian conflict between communities in this tiny corner of Europe should become the source for some of the finest modern poetry in print. For Mahon especially, but also for all these poets, poetry offered an imaginative space and a creative outlet where for once, as Thomas Nagel states ‘Identity is not similarity’, as Mahon sought a way to comprehend and interpret local affairs outside the pressurised, constricting and retrograde attitudes of everyday social and cultural life. Mahon’s engagement with these issues, then, is one appertaining to individuality, the importance of breaking away from hegemonic values and a group mentality, establishing instead one’s own way of thinking. This is in-keeping with an intellectual and existentialist viewpoint rather than the Unionist Protestant values that Mahon inherited. Mahon’s poems from this time produce speakers that are invested in the elevation of the individual and a divergent cultural approach, who no longer rely on the repeated, interminable and monotone narratives of history, culture or specific belonging to a place.

Keeping the development of these young writers in this context in mind, Mahon’s own poems express an alienation from and distrust of the imposition of religious and political determiners on the Northern Irish population and those who succumb to their pull. At the start of his essay “Solving Ambiguity”: The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon’, Bruce Stewart states that Mahon’s poetry ‘became a beacon to younger writers who took no keep of traditional pieties in culture, politics and religion […] the title character of The Last of the Fire Kings’ became something of an emblem for this […] in such a

Mahon was a by-word for scepticism and sophistication. Stewart makes a valuable point, scepticism and suspicion dominate the landscape of Mahon’s poetry in his alienating himself from Protestant Unionism. This is an individual characteristic of his work that sets it apart from his peers’. I want to go further by asserting the positive characteristics of liminality, interstitiality, peripherality and existentialism in Mahon’s poetry, these qualities challenge centralized, hegemonic beliefs in the Northern Irish community and prevent his poetry from becoming one more negative entity in the face of another negative entity – the Troubles. The scepticism that Stewart finds is part of a dark ironic acceptance of the limitations of Mahon’s own liminal ideas.

The imagined responses to the Troubles and their cultural, religious and political dilemmas amongst Mahon’s contemporaries, all associated with what would become known as ‘The Belfast Group’, were vastly different and proposed separate ways out of the predicament. For Seamus Heaney the solution was to turn inwards and outwards simultaneously, to build up the mythology of the home place and explore the revelatory feelings produced there, exploiting the aesthetic potential of Scandinavian pre-history and archaeological finds in the process; for Michael Longley it was to turn more towards elegy and the humane, sympathetic viewing of the Troubles’ casualties, the embrace of a traditionally formal practice, the natural world and the love lyric; and for Paul Muldoon it was to veer into post-modernism – his poems incorporate an irrepresible urge to explore the English lexicon, disparate subject matter and a sense of mischievous impertinence. Muldoon’s attitude seems most closely aligned with Mahon’s in its deliberate championing of new and unfamiliar cultures, subject matter and place. Where Longley and Heaney’s poems probe different locales and linger contemplatively on subject matter, from within and outside Northern Ireland, Mahon and Muldoon’s poems are restless, search impatiently for new ideas and outlooks, continually in flux.

The oppositional perspectives in Mahon’s poems revolve around the attempt to find aesthetic individuality in a new cultural space abrading against the immediate (*Lives*) and then the lasting (*The Snow Party*) impact of the Troubles on his literary imagination, this can be interpreted through Gayatri Spivak’s notion of ‘The possibility of possession, of being haunted […]’ The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the

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concrete experience of the oppressed’. When Mahon’s speaker in ‘An Image from Beckett’ states that, ‘Still, I am haunted / by that landscape’ he might be referring to the immediate vicinity but I also want to suggest that this is the cultural landscape and ideologies of the Troubles trying to reintegrate themselves into the poem, as is the case in all the poems I have discussed in this thesis. Mahon’s strategically liminal imaginative space is an attempt to dispose of the oppression that resulted from tribal attitudes in Northern Ireland, but these old ideals and beliefs often crackle into life like interference during the interstitial and peripheral journeying of his speakers.

For Edna Longley, ‘commemoration is an ethnic site where religion, politics and history powerfully fuse [...] It expresses the desire to erase both the cultural presence and cultural memory of the perceived Other...Commemoration is not just reactive or passive but a reinforcement of mystical kinship bonds and hence a political agent.’ This reinforcement is reliant on the static quality of such sites. Mahon initiates so much dynamism and mobility in his poems to reject and invalidate notions of kinship. The Troubles, where two cultural groups with conflicting beliefs attempted to gain advantage over the other, led to the strengthening of bonds. Mahon’s poetry in response to this is anti-commemorative in its desire to disrupt and undermine not ‘the perceived Other’ in this conflict, but all cultural identities and signifiers through which we form the self. Mahon does not seek to erase these factors, rather he looks for the other outside the bracketing individuations of this period and brings them into the liminal space of his poems, where those ancestral cultural, religious and political boundaries of Northern Ireland can then be attenuated and distorted. His method in Lives and The Snow Party is to push towards interstitial positions and peripheral locations as part of an individual intellectual and imaginative project where both political and religious doctrines no longer dominate.

Both collections establish an individual identity and set of cultural conditions where Mahon defines his own standpoint relative to the given religious and political prognosis in late 1960s and early 1970s Northern Ireland, one not based around traditional determiners, ‘the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial

cultures', that Bhabha mentions. By pursuing new cultural influences and taking direction from such schools as postnationalism, postcolonialism, existentialism, modernism and the postmodern, he tries to plot a course through the same issues as his contemporaries but in a unique way. However, Mahon realises the significance of the polarisation in cultural attitudes that occurred during the Troubles as well as their absurdity; his poems show that Unionist Protestantism and Republican Catholicism, ordinary cultural perspectives, are anchors for human experience in this context, but that they are also exhausted, ineffectual and too repetitive as principles since the same debate about culture keeps being opened in Northern Ireland, a fetishising of these terms and beliefs, seemingly without resolution. This sense of exhaustion, but also the conflicting incitement to seek out unfamiliar cultural, historical and geographical states, are apparent in all the poems I have analysed from Lives and The Snow Party. The paradoxes they contend with are both problem and solution.

For Mahon, the liminal places are the most important as they offer relative freedom from the illogical fixation on identity and cultural outlooks in this era; the in-between and the marginal are where divergent cultures, places, histories and influences are free to converge or become abstracted as in poems such as ‘Lives’ and ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’. This is represented through an unrestrained imaginative scope, not defined by the Troubles, and in particular a fascination with rubbish and detritus. Mahon appropriates such formal techniques as metaphor and imagery in his rubbishing approach to history and culture. History and culture are not the tidy, compact entities we would like them to be, instead they are scattered, confusing and disassociative; Mahon’s imagery of rubbish and wasteland is part of an overall enterprise where historical and cultural narratives are trashed, disassembled and dispersed, as found in poems such as ‘Entropy’ and ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’. The start of the Troubles in 1969 challenged Mahon to find a new poetic style and aesthetic outlook that could accommodate the new crisis facing his country, or face the prospect of dying as a poet. His response was to problematise this situation, to create liminal reimaginings as an idiosyncratic response to
a collective crisis. This is a poetry that acknowledges the complications and anxieties around the established forms of culture during the Troubles but that deliberately and effectively turns to cultures, histories and places independent of them and refuses to bow to cultural expectation. This cultural dilemma is both an impediment and a source of great release, Mahon’s speakers seem to originate in a binary or paradox that revolves around exhilaration and dejection. It forced Mahon to initiate a new phase in his poetic development resulting in the formal breakthrough of ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ that concludes The Snow Party, where the larger stanzas of his mature style are pre-empted. This poem represents both a full stop and a gateway; thematically it closes this specific phase in Mahon’s work as well as anticipating the wider reach of his fourth collection The Hunt By Night (1980). Formally it also signals a return to a larger, more traditionally formal stanza. This shift is represented by perhaps the two best known poems from The Hunt By Night, the ekphrastic poem based on Pieter de Hooch’s painting, ‘Courtyards in Delft’, and ‘A Garage in Co. Cork’ which obviously plays on the title of The Snow Party’s closing poem. Despite these developments, Lives and The Snow Party remain the whetstones in Mahon’s poetic thinking. Their influence is felt throughout his later work. Even Mahon’s later verse letters, a collection such as The Hudson Letter (1995) and the more recent volumes Life On Earth (2008) and An Autumn Wind (2010) refer back to and continue to be informed by these decisive collections.

What they represent then is an intentional flight to the liminal where this cultural, historical pressure intrudes but is subverted by influences external to the Troubles. Lyotard states that, ‘As distinguished from a litigation, a differend (differend) would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties that cannot equitably be resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both parties. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy.’ The specific positions of the Troubles themselves are part of a previously extant and incessant problem in Ireland concerning political and cultural ownership. Mahon sees this as going as far back to ancient Celtic and Gaelic Ireland, continuing through British colonialism and re-emerging again in the context of the Troubles. The poetry in Lives and The Snow Party is always informed by a lack of resolution to this long-standing historical and cultural obstacle. We can apprehend this

feeling in a poem such as ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ where this problem of the inheritance of a cultural domain and the unease around this bestowal, the wish to be released from its sway, is made manifest.

To further contemplate the ramifications and significance of liminality in Mahon’s poetry, since we cannot categorise him as part of a movement or clique, we should also look at it side by side with the poetry of his contemporaries and analyse it through that wider perspective, if not part of a school, then as part of the emergence of a new generation of poetic talent from Northern Ireland in the wake of a major cultural dilemma. The individual nature of Mahon’s liminal aesthetic stands out when considered alongside Heaney, Longley and Muldoon. Mahon’s poems speak to us from uniquely wasted, littered and marginal spaces, where the subject matter and visual ideas of the poems serve to break down and undermine cultural narratives and religious or political directives. That the subject matter or places in the poems themselves are often outmoded or in states of disrepair is no coincidence, this is part of the same enterprise, in ‘Entropy’ and ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ for instance. They also issue from in-between spaces that can accommodate the oppositions of cultural fixity alongside interference from foreign cultural influences.

We can relate this aspect of Mahon’s creative and imaginative direction to a larger cultural process articulated by David Cairns and Shaun Richards who state that, ‘Culture, then, requires the drive towards – if not the achievement of – unity. But the contradictions that are necessarily excluded as a means of its achievement are quite literally those elements that contra-dict, speak against and speak otherwise than the dominant group.’ During the Troubles both cultural groups, Unionist Protestants and Republican Catholics, hoped to dominate the political and religious arena, but each sides’ vehemence to do so meant that unity was an impossibility, so they remained in deadlock. Mahon’s investment in speakers who step outside this process into the liminal space where cultural restraints are lifted from the imagination and divested, provides a poetic way out of this stalemate. Naturally, the poems suffer an alienation and distancing from such issues but they also innovate and try to renew the past even with all its historical

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253 Mahon, 1975, p. 9.
and cultural baggage, the figure of the anthropologist in *Lives*, apparently slowed and a servant to his massive amount of equipment is one way that this load and pressure is conveyed, but he also represents ideas of change and reinterpretation.

Mahon does not omit the Troubles and their disputes from his poems, but introduces a problematic that confronts the lonely estrangement of choosing to opt out of cultural fixities and the claustrophobic pressure of remaining within their remit, mentioning in an interview with Eamon Grennan his interest in, ‘solitude and the community; the weirdness and terrors of solitude; the stifling and the consolations of community. Also, the consolations of solitude. But it is important for me to be on the edge looking in. […] What interests me is forbidden poetry written by solitaries in the cold, written by solitaries in the open’. Mahon’s speakers occupy these liminal spaces in-between solitary and communal states and peripheral to them, his poems are reliant on this contradiction between the desire to be free from cultural hegemony and being intrigued by it. The divided interest of liminality is a key feature of the way Mahon’s poems problematise the cultural exigencies that want the individual to define and perceive their experience of culture and interpretation of the self through established historical narratives. In a paradoxical stance the liminality effected in Mahon’s poetry of this period keeps the cultural beliefs of the Troubles quite close at hand, in order to better counteract their influence, but also remains distanced from them, deliberately and continuously agitating the continuous narrative sectarians on both sides would have each individual subscribe to. This could easily result in a superseding sense of nothingness and despair, given Mahon’s existentialist interests but this is resisted by the imaginative range of the poems, as Thomas Flynn states, ‘it is into this world of limited and relative observation and assessment that the existentialist enters with his or her drive to “personalise” the most impersonal phenomena in our lives’. The cultural conflict of the Troubles was taken personally by many people; sectarians, religious and political figures were keen to emphasise the personal dimension, but the reality for Mahon is that such ideological definition of our existence in time and space is actually a process of depersonalisation designed to eradicate individual imagination and creativity, as well as independence of thought. We see the interplay between a potential void and ideas that enact a

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reorientation of cultural and historical perspectives not based around linear narratives in a poem such as ‘Entropy’; here the two are balanced, with objects that signify and are suggestive of new readings of culture held in a landscape of catastrophe and breakdown.

Such an approach, the declining of accepted cultural stances and an aversion to pre-packaged grand narratives can be tied to John Goodby’s idea that ‘consistent secularism and individualism highlight both the Protestant-background poet’s opportunity for querying mythic and archetypal histories and, at the same time, show a shallowness and failure to empathise with lived communal experience which others felt only myth could furnish’, but I don’t think lack of empathy is Mahon’s problem. His use of liminal imagined spaces results from his own experience as part of the Northern Irish community and his disapproval of the way in which both sides of that community were behaving during the Troubles. So, the lack of empathy is not with a public caught up in the same absurd political and religious finalities, but really with those cultural standpoints that one was expected to conform to, that are the source of regressive, impervious attitudes towards anything that isn’t the same, that are scared and intimidated by anything foreign which might force a person into a legitimate questioning as to why they have resorted to sectarianism and the subsuming of the individual into the group. These are ciphers for Mahon but they are also productive sites for his aesthetic process. This kind of opposition is a significant one for a poem like ‘Rage for Order’, where the poet is a source of interest and agitation for the speaker, who obviously sees him as foreign and atypical, which simultaneously attracts and repels him from the possible alternatives such a figure presents to an individual assimilated into the centre of culture. Bhabha refers back to liminality, the in-between space originally mentioned by Turner, as a way of explaining this phenomenon, where the secure framework of culture and history is brought into disrepute, forced to make a case for itself against fresh influences that are not spoiled by their prior contact with these, stating:

‘The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as an in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.’

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259 Bhabha, 1994, p. 7.
Bhabha’s mentioning of a ‘borderline’ is also suggestive of Turner’s other interpretation of liminality as a peripheral state. This process of subverting history and culture in Mahon’s poems has to occur on the edges of traditional cultural activity as this is where such cultural fixity is weaker and less effective at governing the individual’s perspective of culture and the beliefs that they ultimately hold. It is the oppositional qualities in Mahon’s subject matter, speakers, influences and use of place in all of the poems I have analysed from Lives and The Snow Party that help accomplish this renewal; but it cannot be a total change because these are also alert to the repetitious cycle of both historical and cultural ancestry and disclose an anxiety and unease around these matters; this arises from Mahon’s problematising, ‘the idea of cultural fixity which these boundaries promote […] boundaries are brought into conscious and critical scrutiny’. 260 For Mahon at this stage in his career the notion of boundaries was in a sense a physical, geographical one, since his personal life involved a significant amount of travel and relocation; but the underlying and more important boundaries for his poetry from this time are political, religious and cultural, those that led to the sectarianism that reappeared in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and whose establishing narratives, from a cultural and historical perspective, he deliberately alters, deviates from and dismisses, so that in his poems we can ascertain a resultant liminality. What we must read into each poem is Mahon’s discarding of traditional cultural narratives as a way of defining the individual in relation to cultural, religious and political during the Troubles, each poems’ individual usage of subject matter, place, speaker, even their titles, can be taken as a rejection and an attempt to disrupt these long standing archetypes that in light of the Troubles no longer seemed relevant or appropriate ways of thinking about culture or a fitting angle to go about the activity of writing poetry or to represent the central dilemma of that time.

In this analysis of Mahon’s poetry from the late 1960s and early 1970s, concentrating on Mahon’s own creative enterprises and the context of the Troubles with its violent cultural divergence, I hope to have shown how his poetry is best understood through its liminal strategy, that the interstices between culture and a peripheral ground distanced from the influence of culture’s often entrancing and overwhelming pull are its defining aesthetic trademarks. Such liminality is produced through a deliberately provocative choice of subject matter, a range of speakers, places and formal techniques. Seamus

Heaney has written that the cultural context of the Troubles makes the poems produced under those circumstances necessarily political, even if they take a route to understanding the cultural problem that is entirely different and quite unknown to the revert to factory setting style religion and politics that both tribes advocated, stating, ‘It is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions. […] the idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of a poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics does not absolve it from political responsibility.’\footnote{Seamus Heaney, 2002, \textit{Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001} (London: Faber and Faber), p. 118.} This does not equate with cultural allegiance or group conformity, quite the opposite, especially for Mahon, where the notion of responsibility weighs heavily on the poems even though his speakers are not interested in assuming the role of tribal mouthpieces. The imaginative realm of Mahon’s poems is not the centralised, parochial one where inherited customs or invented heritage are free to propagate further insularity and division, but a peripheral and in-between zone, appropriate for Mahon’s interest in the ‘representation of difference […] restaging the past’,\footnote{Bhabha, 1994, p. 2.} a strategically liminal restaging that entails a necessary separation from the received ideals of the Troubles and his own Protestant background.

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