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Eóin Flannery

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"LISTEN TO THE LEAVES": DEREK MAHON'S EVOLVING ECOLOGIES

Eóin Flannery

I

"New York Time," previously "The Hudson Letter" (1996), opens in "Winter," and the poetic speaker is awoken amid snow and ice in New York City to the combined but competing strains of "the first bird and the first garbage truck."[1] These "garbage trucks," which will later discharge their discarded cargoes onto the "refuse barges" (*NCP,* 167) of the fourth section, "Waterfront," of the sequence, are twinned with the early-morning avian chorus outside the beleaguered speaker's apartment window. The discordant sonority of the metropolis's daybreak exposes the tonal ambiguity of the longer poetic sequence at the same time as it addresses, in cursory fashion, the dynamics of the human and nonhuman ecological crisis. Derek Mahon initiates his sequence, and this day, with an incongruous but all too frequent urban duet, which aggregates the natural and the fabricated, and the sentient and the inanimate, all of which are "a measure of his response to the crisis of industrial (or postindustrial) modernity, with useless rubbish, garbage, or waste functioning as a secular *memento mori* of the empire of the transient that is consumer culture."[2] In a concise ironic gesture, Mahon disallows the muse-like possibilities of the unseen birdsong by using the mechanical, utilitarian functions of the disposal vehicle. Not only does this reference, among many others across "New York Time," partake of a preoccupation with waste, but it neatly holds in one line a matter of urgency within contemporary environmentalist criticism: the uneven, competing claims of the environment and of global capital.

"New York Time," then, abounds with the junked residues, the neon skylines, the clamorous streetscapes, and the informational gluttony of postmodernity: "News-time / in the global village—Ethiopian drought, /

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famine, whole nations, races, evicted even yet . . . / the images forming which will be screened tonight / on CNN and *The McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*" (*NCP,* 165). All of these are symptoms of industrialism and indiscriminate urbanization that both repel and fascinate Mahon's humanism and his aestheticism. This city is portrayed in terms of modern life as excess, as waste, as consisting of the leftovers of Western humanity's appetites, yet poetic art is molded from its raw, remaindered materials. Mahon is both observer and participant in this historical pageant of consumerism but is chiefly concerned with tracking the velocity of ruination and dereliction in such a cultural economy. From an ecocritical perspective, then, hubristic modernity is worryingly devoid of a responsible historical consciousness; its forms and contents, conceived as unaging or ever-replaceable monuments of triumphant capital, are exposed as transient objects on a conveyor of junked consumables.

The catholicity of Mahon's cultural approach has, as we have already alluded to, always been an acknowledged facet of his work and, it seems, informs his broad ecological vision. And Hugh Haughton encapsulates the chafing dynamics of locality and internationalism, with reference to Mahon's eco-conscientiousness, that condition his longer-term writing career:

> If he started out as a poet in resistance to his home place, he went on to become a uniquely compelling poet of other places without abandoning the notion of poetry as a form of resistance. . . . Though in love with the aesthetic, and gifted with an ear for intellectual *cantabile,* there is always an edge of political anger, and cultural critique in his work, born of a sense of damage that has become increasingly ecological.[3]

Haughton is unafraid to impress the political edges of Mahon's poetry, which is a step that is not always taken in critical readings of his work. Yet, the ecological sensibility of his oeuvre, though expressed in different ways and with different landscapes and objects to the fore at various stages, cannot be figured in any other way than in political terms. Equally, Haughton's suggestion that Mahon's poetic, and biographical, peregrinations have taken Mahon beyond the bounds of Belfast and Ireland to international and cosmopolitan geographies, without blunting this political strain within his work, is crucial to appreciating the gravity of his assumption of ecological advocacy in his later work.[4] Though, as we have said, and as Haughton's final point indicates, Mahon's career has been marked by a keen ecological awareness.[5]

Early poems drawn from autobiographical details, such as "Glengormley" (*NCP,* 16) and "A Refusal to Mourn" (*NCP,* 79), engage, in different ways, with modernity and historical progress, meditating on humanity's transience, and even alluding to the frames of *deep* historical time, which we encounter in different guise in more recent work. In "Glengormley," with its roots in civilized suburban Belfast, Mahon wields his ironic optic in a dismissive appraisal of the accruals of contemporary modernization, while, in "A Refusal to Mourn,"[6] the poet uses the demise of his grandfather and of the lifestyles of that generation as a figurative device with which to dwell upon the precariousness of humanity's hold on the planet's history. From the synecdochic "a plover flops in his oil slick" (*NCP,* 65) of the "The Antigone Riddle" (*NCP,* 65), to the accumulated debris of "Gipsies," with "The cars are piling up. / I listen to the wind / and file receipts; the heap / of scrap metal in my / garden grows daily" (*NCP,* 66), Mahon's earlier work betrays a consciousness of ecological spoliation. And, exemplifying Mahon's interest in the waste products of civilization, "the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab, / of wine and Windolene . . . Imperishable by-products of the perishable will" in "The Apotheosis of Tins" (1975), this ecological conscience has attended to consumerism, pollutants, refuse, and the culpability of humanity in the history of environmental degradation.[7]

In these five poems, in the aforementioned "New York Time," but perhaps most famously in "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" and "A Garage in Co. Cork," ecological conscience is pricked by the exertions of human civilization, and Mahon brings spatial clutter, the passage of historical time, and the proximity of natural and manmade ruination into constellation. Both of these poems transcend the "locality" of their titular coordinates, and both speak from spatial and temporal locations of aftermath and abandonment. From the outset of "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," Mahon colocates humanity and nonhumanity in sites of aftermath and does so with an eye to the global as well as the local and the immediate: "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 wild flowers in the lift-shaft [. . .] And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford" (*NCP,* 81).[8] While the poem has legitimately been read as a meditation on Irish political history and as a requiem for the victims of global history, it can just as easily be considered a response to the triumphalist narratives and exertions of Western modernization. Industrialization, with its built-in capacity for, even necessity for, dehumanization and ecological ruination, is a forceful presence in this lyric of abandoned detritus. And the ethical implications of the poem,

which demand justice and recognition through empathetic remembrance, are given effective ecological form in the central mycological figuration: "Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins / A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole [. . .] 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!" (*NCP,* 81–82).

"A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" is an earlier incarnation of the ecological content of Mahon's work, and there is a formal integrity to the stanzaic structure of the poem with its six uniform stanzas of ten lines. But Mahon brings still more formal rigor to "A Garage in Co. Cork," which is arranged in eight stanzas of six lines, and approaches the form of a Shakespearean "Venus and Adonis" stanza in terms of its ababcc rhyme scheme.[9] So while the content of this latter poem speaks of yet another scene of abandonment and ruination, of flight and decay, Mahon restores measures of dignity and integrity through the formal patterning, or "gleam" (*NCP,* 122), of his verse. Just as in the previous poem, the remainders of absent humanity and the resistant presence of nonhumanity are colocated by Mahon: "Surely you paused at this roadside oasis / In your nomadic youth, and saw the mound / Of never-used cement, the curious faces, / The soft-drink ads, and the uneven ground / Rainbowed with oily puddles, where a snail / Had scrawled its slimy, phosphorescent trail" (*NCP,* 121).

The poem is a confrontation with the legacies, emotional and physical, of Irish emigration and, in this sense, cannot be excised from Mahon's engagements with the imprints and machinations of global economic modernization. Indeed, Irish emigration is figured as accruing local as well as international effects; while the garage is haunted by the past lives imagined by the poetic speaker, the same speaker speculates on the likely destinations of the emigrants: "Where did they go? South Boston? Cricklewood? / Somebody somewhere thinks of this as home" (*NCP,* 121). There is a gravitas to Mahon's investment in this site of aftermath; neither the formal integrity nor the philosophical register of much of the latter half of the poem serves to diminish the humanity at the core of Mahon's vision. While the larger context of the poem takes in the global, Mahon refuses to ironize the relics of homeliness and place, as he concludes: "We might be anywhere but are in one place only, / One of the milestones of earth-residence / Unique in each particular, the thinly / Peopled hinterland serenely tense— / Not in the hope of a resplendent future / But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature" (*NCP,* 122).

All of the artifacts and the theaters of modernity poeticized by Mahon are fractions of the ecological impact of humanity on the planet—an impact

that has been exacerbated in, what he dubs in "Decadence," previously "The Yellow Book," "an age of sado-monetarism" (*NCP,* 206). The relationship between the materially populous and the derelict, and hyperreal, terrains of these earlier poems and many of those that appear in *Life on Earth* (2008) and *An Autumn Wind* (2010) can be read in terms of diagnosis and solution. The earlier work seems to chart and to narrate, in ambiguous tones, the ravages of anthropocentric history, whereas later work reflects on both the consequences and the potential cures for such destructive historical patterns. Though Mahon does not entirely starve his appetite for the alluring excesses of industrial modernity in recent work, and there are continuities, the contemporary moment is a time for reflection on the harvests of anthropogenic climate change. The epoch, provisionally classified as the Anthropocene by climate scientists,[10] is a period in which humans have become "geological agents" influencing the planet's long-term climatic equilibrium.[11] With his heightened sense of the enduring damage of contingent human history, his "rebuke [of] the anthropocentrism of the post-Enlightenment project,"[12] it might be accurate to nominate Mahon as a poetic chronicler of the Anthropocene epoch and of its effects, operations, and, latterly, the possible deceleration of its worst legacies. Whereas Mahon has been lauded as the first Irish poet of the city and of modernity, a poet whose poetic reflexes are excited by "North coast seascapes, desolate landscapes littered with the detritus of modern civilisation, frozen wastes, the depressed conditions of urban and suburban life," more recent work indicates that Mahon might well now be read as the pioneering Irish poet of engaged ecological conscience.[13] And in reviewing Mahon's work in this way, we situate it within a burgeoning field of Irish ecopoetic criticism.

Principally treating Mahon's latest collections, *An Autumn Wind,* and, in particular, *Life on Earth,* we will elaborate on Mahon's ecological vision in the "Homage to Gaia" (2008) sequence, "Homage to Goa" (2008), "A Quiet Spot" (2010), "Beached Whale" (2010), "Synge Dying" (2010), and "Dreams of a Summer Night" (2010). Having, at different stages, recoiled from, and ironized, the deformations of industrial modernity, as well as intricately mapping the cityscapes of late modernity, Mahon's more recent verse has, at times, displayed a more celebratory tone and has seen the poet adopt the role or voice of ecological advocacy. Yet, at the same time, as the following close readings of the poems will reveal, Mahon's work retains a familiar formal coherence and structure, which suggests that though a new politics of ecological conscience is tangible, this is not conveyed in a new poetics by Mahon. Indeed, a sequence like "Homage to Gaia" retains elements of the formal integrity so prized by Mahon.[14] Professing

a faith in Coleridgean organic unity, Mahon expands on his poetics in the same interview with fellow poet Eamon Grennan: "I'm interested in organization. I'm interested in at least the appearance of control, orchestration, forceful activity; something intense happening, something being intended and achieved—purposefulness instead of randomness."[15] As we shall discuss, "Homage to Gaia" embodies these principles in one of its key figurative arrangements—an arrangement that equally speaks to the environmental politics of the sequence.[16]

II

By far the most sustained of Mahon's ecopoetry in *Life on Earth* is the sequence "Homage to Gaia"; in fact, the sequence is one of the most explicit examples of the coincidence of ecoconsciousness and poetry in contemporary Irish writing. Although the sequence cannot measure up to either "New York Time" or "Decadence" in terms of sheer length, as well as assuming an alternative formal structure, nevertheless, its relative length and protracted treatment of ecological issues recalls those earlier epistolary and reflective meditations on urban, modern life patterns, which are, of course, ecological in their own ways. Yet, as already stated, there are tonal and thematic divergences between the later sequence and its predecessors, though an ecological sensibility conjoins the earlier work and more recent volumes. In entitling the sequence "Homage to Gaia," Mahon signals his concern with a specific, and not uncontroversial, school within contemporary climate science, though it is not his first poetic invocation of Gaia, seen previously in the "St. Mark's Place" section of "New York Time": "When will she—Gaia, Clio—send downpours / to silence the "gnostic chirrup of her calumniators?" (*NCP,* 177). But in *Life on Earth,* rather than giving thought to W. H. Auden, Mahon's energies are concentrated on pressing climatic developments. And Mahon's interest in Gaian theory intersects with his recent *turn* to the Indian subcontinent—specifically his time spent in Goa. "Here in India," Mahon reflects in his essay "Indian Ink" (2012), "you're closer to the heart of the natural world. The very dust of the road is alive with intimations. . . . Insect life makes no distinction between field and room, outside and in; bushes and trees have a speaking presence."[17] Edging towards the organicism of Gaia theory, Mahon invokes one of the Mahāvākyas (Grand Pronouncements) in Vedantic Sanatana Dharma: "You're part of all this, *tat tvam asi,* only human by chance; it's easy to understand the old belief in serial incarnation. . . . All this ties in with Gaia theory, which reminds us that we belong

to nature."[18] In this last clause, Mahon's intent seems to be to de-alienate humanity from its own deep historical, as well as contemporary, implication in the environmental fluctuations of the planet.

James Lovelock originally floated the Gaia hypothesis in cursory published form in 1972, when he submitted a letter to the editors of the scientific periodical *Atmospheric Environment.*[19] In this correspondence, Lovelock summarized, in a brief literature review of leading scientific publications of that time, the unavoidable logic of his ecological proposition. He acknowledged that adjacent ideas of a "living" planet had been traded within the scientific community for centuries, but he felt the need to recapitulate such thought in rigorous, up-to-date scientific fashion. For Lovelock, "The purpose of this letter is to suggest that life at an early stage of its evolution acquired the capacity to control the global environment to suit its needs and that this capacity has persisted and is still in active use."[20] Lovelock's implication is that the planet is intuitive and self-regulating—flexible and ruthless in its sustenance of life on earth. Rather than retain outmoded understandings of the earth as an accumulation of species and objects, Lovelock impressed the view that "the sum total of species is more than just a catalogue . . . and like other associations in biology is an entity greater than the simple sum of its parts."[21]

The failure to apprehend, or the lack of will to recognize, the intuitive flexibility of the earth is, in his estimation, one of the primary symptoms of contemporary anthropocentrism. Human-centered perspectives on ecological evolution, then, limit our understandings of both our contemporary planetary conditions and those that have obtained across the planet's billions of years of prehuman evolutionary history. Such a self-destructively hubristic mind-set is emphasized by Lovelock at the close of his letter: "The concept of Gaia has been intuitively familiar throughout history and perhaps only recently has it been distorted by anthropocentric rationalizations . . . Gaia, several giga-years old who has moulded the surface, the oceans, and the air to suit her and for the very brief time we have been part of her, our needs."[22] Lovelock's letter, then, captures some of the driving themes of his later, extended work on the Gaia hypothesis: mutability, interconnectedness, and the damaging irresponsibility that characterizes humanity's short period of participation in the Gaian life cycle on earth. And it is such thematics, echoing, but not necessarily derived from, those found in Lovelock, that animate Mahon's work in *Life on Earth.*

Though Lovelock's Gaia theory on the self-regulating nature of the planet has undergone empirical stress tests and refinements since its debut in the 1970s, its currency as a wholly satisfactory explanatory model of planetary functioning remains contested. That said, it is widely

enough held as scientifically feasible for Mahon to co-opt its metaphorical potentials into his often celebratory and often humble verse sequence. And it is the figurative resonances of Lovelock's theory that harbor the more effective agency in alerting public consciousness to its responsibilities towards and implications within our ecological emergency. Equally, interdependence speaks to the metaphorical mobilizations of Gaia theory within ecopolitics, a point underscored in the same essay by Lovelock: "Perhaps its [Gaia theory] greatest value lies in its metaphor of a living Earth, which reminds us that we are a part of it and that human rights are constrained by the needs of our planetary partners."[23]

Reviewing *Life on Earth,* John McAuliffe noted the shift in the spirit of Mahon's writing in this collection: "[W]here once he thrived on descriptions of a posthumous, posthuman planet, Mahon's new ecology celebrates . . . the coming, post-petroleum age, writing perhaps the first hymns to alternative energy supplies."[24] Specifically in "Its Radiant Energies" and "Wind and Wave," the first and third poems in the sequence respectively, Mahon extols the virtues and the operations of solar, wind, and wave energies. But before these alternative energy sources are explored, it is worth looking at the title poem "Homage to Gaia," where Mahon undertakes a mea culpa on behalf of humanity in a direct address to "great Gaia our first mother" (*LE,* 46). In six quatrains of primarily iambic trimeter, Mahon moves from past to present, variously lamenting the sundering of the earth's natural abundance and seeking absolution from Gaia the Earth matriarch. The poem dramatizes the *collective* destructive excesses of humanity, yet it is Mahon who speaks *individually.* Human history has been an accumulation of ruination, for which an apology must be issued: "Since we destroyed the woods / with crazy chainsaws, oiled / the sea, burned up the clouds, / upset the natural world / to grow fat [. . .]" (*LE,* 46). The individual poetic voice admits to the litany of ecological transgressions in a series of half rhymes and assumes the role of advocate for humanity.

From this apocalyptic opening, the poetic voice offers a singular apology and moves into a formal homage to the earth's nonhuman ecology: "[I]f I may / I want to apologize / for our mistakes and pay / homage to the seas and skies, / to field and stream; to you, / great Gaia our first mother" (*LE,* 46). But this recent apologia for collective human disregard for the planet's ecological welfare is not simply a reference to the destructive trends noted in the opening stanza of this poem. The argument here is that a poem such as "Homage to Gaia" can be read as a culminating verse in Mahon's long-term poetic attention to the ecological wastefulness and dereliction witnessed in the disparate urban, seaboard, and rural geographies of his life experiences and that populate his earlier poetry.

The self-consciousness and humility voiced in "Homage to Gaia" represent a definite shift from the frequent presiding tones of irony and exhaustion of Mahon's previous ecological writing. Likewise, the celebratory emotions displayed in other poems in the Gaia sequence reveal equivalent mood changes in Mahon's latter ecological poetics. But if "Homage to Gaia" is an expression of contrition, and if it foregrounds a lack of human gratitude, together with a surfeit of human complacency, in its disrespect for the planet—"You've done so much for us / and what do we give back?" (*LE,* 46)—Mahon also captures the vulnerabilities of humanity in ecological terms and in terms of geological time. There is a sense in which humanity's destruction of the planet has been, in some measure, a function of its desire to survive—an index of its ingenuity that will, ultimately, lead to a fundamental, perhaps fatal, transformation of its biosphere. Again, transience and metamorphosis, familiar Mahonian ideas, are imported into the verse, but this time to underscore the damaging accruals of human sustenance. This, then, presents a paradoxical situation whereby the labors of survival contribute to potential, imminent pollution and demise: "You will prevail of course / if in a different form; / we go from bad to worse / just trying to keep warm" (*LE,* 46). In this way, Mahon raises the question of how human survival has become enmeshed in a raft of ethical debates. So, although the poem is conditioned by a newly forged urge towards active contrition, a typically Mahonian unease remains in the speaker's tone, and in the eye cast on the diminished activities of humanity.

Mahon's sequence tenders moments of celebration in dealing with the alternative energy sources of "the post-petroleum age." Based on "an acute sense . . . that human and creaturely experience must find a way of existing together within the same landscape," the first and third poems revel in the ingenuities of wind, solar, and wave powers.[25] Moving from the "Dark energies," mentioned in the earlier poem in *Life on Earth,* "A Country Road," the opening poem of the Gaia sequence is entitled "Its Radiant Energies." The poem takes the form of nine quatrains and has some telling grammatical features that abet the differential authorial tones present in the piece. Thematically centered on the processes of harvesting the sun's solar energy, "Its Radiant Energies" at times adopts an equivalent deference to this celestial object as witnessed in "Homage to Gaia"; at one point, in the penultimate stanza, we read, "Great sun, dim or bright, / eye in the changing sky, / send us warmth and light!" (*LE,* 45).[26] But this paean to the solar body is gradually built during the previous seven stanzas, and, in fact, Mahon employs another brief ironic interlude to open the poem when he writes of "A world of dikes and bikes / where yoghurt-weavers drive / on gin and margarine [. . .]" (*LE,* 44). The ellipsis here

suggests the ironic register because it represents an ironic hiatus between the short opening section of the poem and the remaining stanzas. The disarming facetiousness of this section actually belies the ecological vision and otherwise celebratory tone of "Its Radiant Energies."

At another level, the poem is bookended by defining grammatical features; this opening ellipsis is responded to towards the conclusion of the poem by two exclamation marks. The first exclamation mark, cited earlier, in "send us warmth and light!" is followed in the last line of the poem by the emphatic plea "Remember life on Earth!" (*LE,* 45). Both exclamations are addressed to the sun, the latter referencing the collection's title, and both seem to trump the ironic cynicism of the poem's opening three lines. Mahon reveals his sensitivity to skepticism surrounding climate change and its proposed solutions, and, again, his response is a combination of celebration and a latent insecurity regarding humanity's survival in the face of overwhelming natural, and celestial, agencies. In the body of the poem, we see the poet's fascination with, and poeticization of, the advanced gadgetry of modern science. On this occasion, the technological innovation seems to secure the poet's ethical approval, given its ecologically sustaining potentials. Solar energy is trapped and used, and the concentration on the rejuvenating capacities of this energy source reprises Mahon's figurative use of light and darkness seen in earlier work. This recent employment is qualitatively different in its exploration of the mechanics of solar power: ". . . gathering light-beams / to run the house with clean / photoelectric frames / that trap the sun and focus its radiant energies; / their glow reflects the seasons, cloud cover, open skies" (*LE,* 44). In these lines, and across the poem, Mahon refers to disparate spatial contexts and juxtaposes temporal ideas of historical change, aftermath, cyclicality, and permanence. The solar body's energies service the requirements of the domestic space while in quick succession we read of "the post-petroleum age," "the seasons," and "Spring starts here in January / and lasts throughout the year," and late in the poem it is asserted, "We can never die / while you are roaring there / in serial rebirth / far from our atmosphere" (*LE,* 45). Clearly, then, the spatial discrepancies between domestic *life on earth* and the elemental agencies on which it depends are germane to the ecological politics of humility and interdependence. But there is also a keen concern with temporality and with history in the repeated allusions to the passing of time and to alternative temporal registers. As will become apparent later, Mahon's focus on temporality in his later poetry is equally central to the ecological temperament of his work.

The fifth poem of Mahon's Gaia sequence, "At Ursula's," situates the speaker in an interior space, though a public space, in which, at one level,

he explores the courtesies and comforts of everyday sociality. Outside it might well be a "cold and stormy morning" (*LE,* 50), but there is a mood of minor excitation engendered by the welcoming surroundings. As the poem progresses, Mahon touches upon urgent socioeconomic matters, including migration, globalization, and cultural integration in Ireland—issues that, of course, bear relevance to broader ecological concerns about population increase and trends of uneven economic development across the globe. Thus, so that in a local site of quotidian routine, Mahon engages with a "bright workforce / who know us from before, / a nice girl from Tbilisi, / Penang or Baltimore" (*LE,* 50). The cozy interiority of "Ursula's," which acts as a haven from the inclement weather conditions outside, equally performs as a location of cross-cultural convention. Staffed in this way, the eatery is indicative of recent migration patterns in Ireland and globally, which themselves reflect the relative triumph (since in retreat to some extent) of liberal capitalist economies. In this microcosm, Mahon fetes the insistent humanity of migration while remaining mindful of the larger corrosive forces that compel and sustain such mobility.

But it is in the culinary coordinates of the poem that we can glean a degree of Mahonian reservation about the cultural and social accruals of consumption, which accompanied Ireland's Celtic Tiger initiation into unfettered globalized capitalist riches. In two successive stanzas of the eight that comprise the poem, we read, "Some red basil linguine / would surely hit the spot, / something light and shiny, / mint-yoghurty and hot; / a frosty but delightful / pistachio ice-cream / and some strong herbal / infusion wreathed in steam" (*LE,* 50). Various and international, Mahon's menu is figurative of the lateral à la carte lifestyles facilitated by Ireland's ill-fated economic preeminence of the last two decades. But there is also a reckoning with place embedded in these consumables—the stability of habit is deeply linked with the diets and culinary regimens of cultures. Mahon's allusions here are suggestive of broader processes of cultural globalization and dislocation that have impacted Irish society and perhaps other societies that have undergone late, accelerated modernization. The poet, inserting an irreverent personal admission, further ironizes the distance put between past and present under the spell of capitalistic and modernized lifestyle options: "Once a tomato sandwich / and a pint of stout would do / but them days are over. / I want to have a go / at some amusing fusion / Thai and Italian both, / a dish of squid and pine-nuts / simmered in lemon broth" (*LE,* 50). So, although "Ursula's" is apparently a sanctuary, the culinary fare on offer therein acts as a less rooted counterpoint to that initial feeling of homeliness. These ideas of location and movement,

of indigeneity and "otherness," and of permanence and change not only relate to the multicultural personnel and the international menu that they purvey but are further link to the sequence's Gaian figuration.

"At Ursula's" is not formally complex in terms of its stanzaic structure—eight four-line stanzas—nor is its irregular rhyme scheme, which reaches towards abab but is interrupted by eye rhymes, half rhymes, and sometimes no attempt at end rhyme. However, the most revealing motif in the poem is evidenced in the foregoing culinary quotations, as well as in non-food-related moments. Mahon punctuates the poem with references to varying conditions of coldness and warmth; in other words, he concentrates his attention on temperature. Superficially, these allusions to temperature are consistent with his reveling in novel gastronomical choices, but they should be read in terms of the overall ecological vision of the Gaia sequence. Listing his references to temperature, we find "cold [. . .] spicy [. . .] hot [. . .] frosty [. . .] steam [. . .] simmered [. . .] cold [. . .] warmer [. . .] warm" (*LE,* 50–51).

Casting further afield in the nine-poem sequence, we can locate consistent invocations of states of heat and/or coldness. From "the close tropical heat" (*LE,* 58) of "Indian Garden," "refrozen ice" (*LE,* 56) in "Dirigibles," and "the confused stink of global warming" (*LE,* 55) of "Ode to Bjork," onto "hot roof tiles / in clouds of rising steam [. . .] Thames / water still bubbles away / as in more temperate times" (*LE,* 53) in "London Rain," "a cold strand" (*LE,* 49) in "Sand and Stars," "burned up the clouds [. . .] Blowing hot and cold [. . .] we go from bad to worse / just trying to keep warm" (*LE,* 46) of "Homage to Gaia," and, finally, "worship the hot sun [. . .] send us warmth and light" (*LE,* 45) in "Its Radiant Energies." The accumulated effect of these ten examples is to focus our reading on the proximity of the Gaia hypothesis to the figurative structure of Mahon's sequence. And it is here that we return to Mahon's retention of formalist unity in this later ecological poetry. The organicism of Lovelock's Gaia theory, it can be argued, is matched by the sense of poetic integrity across this sequence—a renovated ecological politics, thus, comes packaged in familiar Mahonian style.

Reflecting upon the evolution of Lovelock's ideas, Lawrence E. Joseph identified what he considered to be "the key Gaian term."[27] In Joseph's view, "homeostasis" is the fundamental process that underpins Lovelock's entire ecological schema. *Homeostasis* is, in Joseph's gloss of the concept, "the tendency to maintain a state of internal equilibrium through a complex of interdependent systems, such as the way our bodies maintain their temperature without thermostat or switch."[28] The emphasis placed upon retaining an optimum temperature capable of sustaining life on earth is,

then, key to the entire Gaian system, and Lovelock reiterated this in 2006. In stark terms, he declared, "The most important evidence for Gaia is found in the consistency of the Earth's mean temperature through time. . . . [T]he temperature has remained constant in the face of perturbation. To me this is the best evidence of Gaia's system that controls the conditions at the surface of the planet."[29] As an autopoietic system, Gaia's mean temperature might not have altered radically over extended geological time, but it has varied in tune with the needs of maintaining life.

But as Lovelock makes plain, this is not necessarily to perpetuate human life. Based on these conclusions, temperature clearly is one of the cornerstones of the Gaia hypothesis. The combination of nouns, adjectives, and verbs, the various invocations of temperature across "Homage to Gaia," attests to the extent to which Mahon scores the poems with these references to heat and cold variations suggests a superficial continuity with Gaian theory. The extensive variety of heated and frozen states across the poems are, equally, indicative of the vulnerability of Mahon's titular "life on earth" and of the mortal dependence on relatively minor temperature alterations on which these life forms persist. As such, the twinned poles of hot and cold, and the intermediary states of both, already cited, are further instances of ecological changeability and, even, volatility. In this way, Mahon establishes a degree of ambiguity in the sequence. Certainly, one can discern the vigor and celebratory tone of much of the verse, but when effects such as those of vulnerability and volatility (even if it is manmade) are introduced, we witness the presence of a more familiar Mahonian tone of anxiety in the poetic voice in the face of immense ecological agencies.

Life on Earth ends with a move from "Homage to Gaia" to the almost synonymous "Homage to Goa." A lengthy work of six eleven-line stanzas, "Homage to Goa" continues Mahon's focus on cultural exotica; faith; travel and displacement; and human history and planetary time. But the poem also retains the aforementioned tone of humanly defiance found in the resolution of "Indian Garden." "Homage to Goa" is a first-person reflection on the virtues of earthbound life and takes reincarnation as a motif with which to express the value and mutuality of all varieties of life on earth. Cyclicality in life and time bookend the poem, which commences with a coupling of rooted domesticity and aerial mobility—"The ceiling fans in the house go round and round / as if to whisk us off to a different sky" (*LE,* 60)—but ends with a distinction between linearity and cyclicality: "The road to enlightenment runs past the house / with its auto-rickshaws and its dreaming cows / but the fans, like the galaxies, go round and round" (*LE,* 61). These framing figurations of rotation recall

his much earlier employment of rotation as a poetic motif in "The Globe in Carolina": "The earth spins to my fingertips [. . .] The halved globe, slowly turning, hugs / its silence" (*NCP,* 129–30).

But, in the present context, Mahon broaches permanence and transience, and place and placelessness, with one eye on mortality and one on planetary degradation. His use of this figuration, where the daily is wedded to the transcendent, opposes and combines the everyday with the numinous, and in this combined action we can elicit the poet's anxieties about humanity's historical and ecological prospects. Mahon repeatedly voices his desire to remain rooted to the earthly; on two occasions, once each in the final two stanzas, Mahon declares his preference: "Given a choice between paradise and this life / I'd choose this life with its calamities [. . .] Given a choice of worlds, here or beyond, / I'd pick this one not once but many times" (*LE,* 61). Clearly, the option to choose is conditional and speculative, as Mahon's phrasing indicates, but a renewed sense of faith, and of investment, in "life on earth" is apparent in these repeated sentiments. That Mahon openly makes such assertions in the concluding stanzas of the final poem of the collection is surely significant in terms of the thematic and tonal resolutions of the collection. Indeed, the earthbound devotion evidenced in "Homage to Goa" chimes with that articulated in the earlier "Research," which took the conch shell as its figurative locus.

But "Homage to Goa" serves as a fitting culmination to *Life on Earth* in other ways: it reprises Mahon's concern with the mutuality of human and nonhuman ecologies in terms of planetary temporality and, once more, registers the relations that exist between humanity and the sea. The third stanza convenes each of these preoccupations, opening with a variant state of moisture—one that addresses changeability and repetition in its own life cycle: "Clouds dream the people and we spread like plants, / waves smash on beaches for no obvious purpose / except to deliver the down-to-earth palingenesis / of multitudinous life particles. A porpoise / revolves on the sky as if in outer space / where we started out so many aeons ago" (*LE,* 61). These five lines dramatize, *in parvo,* many of the anxieties and the energies of international ecocritical thought and writing, as they aggregate nature and culture, together with the extraterrestrial origins of life and the earth. In this short section, Mahon attempts to unite the natural and the cultural; he tries to bridge the gaps between the human and the nonhuman, most obviously in the balanced structure of the first line, which implies mutual sustenance and provenance. From the syntactic composure of the opening line, Mahon proceeds to insert a frisson of humor in the second clause of the four-line sentence. The

anthropocentrism of the first line, which returns us to the life-giving violence of the sea, is undermined by the subsequent revelation of the actual "purpose" of the tidal motions and breaking waters of the sea.

In selecting the word "palingenesis," Mahon imports scientific and religious discourses into the poem at the same time. In the one moment, the poem references rebirth through baptism, transmigration of the soul after death, and the traces of evolutionary change evident in the embryonic stages of living organisms. This one word, then, speaks of cultural, religious faiths—systems of belief that attribute responsibility for planetary creation and natural abundance to an omnipotent deity. There are no unqualified resolutions to the ecological visions and relationships on display in *Life on Earth.* In the end, the residues of his earlier eclogues, which portray ravaged and famished postindustrial landscapes yearning for redemption, are not entirely absent from *Life on Earth*—they simply cannot be—because they are the sites of ecological decline. But there are signal moments of celebration and awed responsibility tangible across the collection. If place and placelessness, and history and time, have been disputed terms in Mahon's work and in critical responses to his work, they remain so in *Life on Earth,* but they have been recalibrated to address the pressing questions of contemporary environmental crisis and humanity's duties in responding to that crisis.

III

In his recent collection, *An Autumn Wind,* Mahon returns to Gaia and/or to the earth goddess of Greek mythology in the poem "A Quiet Spot." Not only is there a deliberate self-reference in this poem to "Homage to Gaia," but Mahon again juxtaposes commodity fetishism with an ethics of ecological duty. "A Quiet Spot" reworks the mode of address seen earlier in *Life on Earth:* "Gaia demands your love, the patient earth / your airy sneakers tread expects / humility and care."[30] In this poem, Mahon alters the addressee: instead of beseeching Gaia, here the poet directs his appeal to humanity—symbolized, perhaps reductively and/or ironically, as a pair of high-tech trainers. Yet what is most significant at this point in terms of the poet's concern for humanity and temporality is, once more, the notion of humility. Humility seems to be a constant international ecopoetics and is certainly an animating ethical presence in Mahon's ecopoetry. And central to ecopoetical demands for humility is the relationship between the past and the present, which requires that humanity disabuse itself of self-affirming narratives of progress and achievement. Contrarily,

it must attune itself to the margins of human history, the occluded of human history, and the brevity of human history. Thus, Mahon's ecopoetry confronts history with a less attenuated and anthropocentric timescale. As Eamonn Hughes explains, "Insofar as there is a narrative or a set of relationships between the places in Mahon's poetry, we would have to characterize them as happening within *evolutionary or geological frames* [original emphasis]."[31]

The lingering traces of evolutionary history provide Mahon with another route into considering the relationship between humanity's pasts and presents in "Beached Whale." Taking the putrefying carcass of a stranded whale as the locus of the poem, Mahon combines salutation, pathos, and curiosity across the eight septains. Precise attention is devoted to the corporeal degeneration, expiration, and anatomization of the whale, including "the great weight of her own insides"; "the rib-cage [. . .] entrails strewn on the mud, the stomach / stripped and the organs—heart, liver" (*AW,* 30–31). But Mahon does not permit the beached whale to exist solely as the spare sum of its bodily parts; this magnificent creature is not reduced to simple biology or, even, functionality. The great beast might well have become a local and media-centered curiosity piece in its death throes—"she has admirers in her drowsy eyes— / surfers and tourists, children, families / who never saw a whale before; and the news cameras, RTE, Channel 4" (*AW,* 30)—but Mahon's imagination of the whale's unseen submarine life supersedes these superficial treatments of its demise on land. In this respect, one might argue that the giant cetacean operates as a synecdoche in the poem, standing in as a figurative representative of all species threatened by global climate change. Two full stanzas are given over to the celebration of this enigmatic marine mammal, detailing its prodigious stamina and mobility. Though moments flirt with romanticization—"[R]usty and barnacled like an old steamship [. . .] On moonlit nights her bubbling orifices / dribbled for miles" (*AW,* 30)—the mystery and the physical scale of the whale's life cycle are what Mahon seizes upon for the poem's central message: "The transatlantic dash was nothing to her, / a fine finback, her notion of a trip / some new dimension, gravity defied, / the dive at dusk through the empyrean / whooping and chuckling in her slick and drip" (*AW,* 30).

Mahon's poem actually can be read in relation to what Jonathan Steinwand has termed "the recent cetacean turn in environmentalist iconography and postcolonial literature [which] looks to whales and dolphins for guidance in how human animals participate in postcolonial ecology."[32] In Steinwand's view, this "turn" to cetaceans is a matter of kinship and deep memory but also distance in the present; he continues, "Dolphins and

whales are compelling figures because of their liminality and ambiguity . . . as mammals they are most closely related to land dwellers and yet they swim in the sea among other animal kingdoms."[33] Though the whale's carcass is lodged on the shore, it catalyzes a memorialization of its life that peaks in the celestial reaches of "the empyrean." Mahon invokes breadth and depth of scale in this description of the mammal's peregrinations and does so to magnify its life in relation to humanity. These proportions far outstrip human capabilities but are also outside the visual experiences of most people; the life of the sea is not entirely containable within current parameters of human knowledge. This sense of the unknown, even the unknowable, in nature is not designed to alienate humanity; rather, it is offered as a means of ecological reenchantment. The living whale is "mysterious and capricious"; she swims "far from known sea-lanes"; while "her whistle and click / [are] distinguishable from Cape Clear to Cape Race" (*AW,* 30). Defying the anthropocentric thoroughfares of the oceans, the whale escapes beyond the maps that structure and delineate the planet's marine expanses.

Again, scale is foregrounded in Mahon's nomination of the poles of the creatures transatlantic movements between the southernmost inhabited part of Ireland and the southeastern tip of the Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland, Canada. And, perhaps, though the curiosity displayed at the sight of the dead whale is spectacularized via media broadcasts, Mahon is, after all, sympathetic to human inquisitiveness, if only it were centered on the living wonders of the whale and nonhuman ecology rather than on the washed-up remnants of its passing. In ecological terms, Mahon's attention to scale and mystery, to outsized proportions that dwarf humanity, is an effort to engender awe and humility in humanity so as to foster a more conscientious attitude towards nonhuman ecology—or, in the spare ecocritical terms of Josh A. Weinstein, "a humility which recognizes the human interest as bound up in the natural world according to a logic of interrelationship and interdependency, rather than the illusion of dominion and mastery."[34]

Later in the same essay on the ecopoetics of Marianne Moore, Weinstein expands on his intertwining of ecopoetics and humility, averring, "[A]ny truly ecological poetics, or ecopoetics, is at some level contingent upon a sense of humility, as this is the most compelling assumption and starting point of an ecological perspective" that he characterizes as "the humble levelling of hierarchy."[35] But hierarchies are diachronic and synchronic, and Mahon's treatment of temporality includes the deconstruction of hierarchy through an excitation of temperamental humility. Just as the extremes of breadth and depth over the life span of one whale

are imagined to evoke feelings of humility in the poet and, prospectively, the reader, Mahon's dilation of the temporal continuum at the end of the poem is designed to arouse similar humble sensations. Scale in physical space is, then, paired with a temporal scale beyond human history, but to which, at the same time, we belong as living organisms, and the residues of which are scripted invisibly onto our bodies. And Mahon alludes to the ancient seas of early planetary history, of the formative stages of geological time: "[H]er ancient knowledge of the seas and rocks / we left to climb up on the burning shore / and still revisit in dreams and sex, / where the soft human paw / has the reflex of an unthinking fin / or a nerve twitching in primordial depths" (*AW,* 31). The first two lines repeat Mahon's earlier privileging of that which is "ancient," and these lines also align the natural creature with humanity. Humanity's origins in the sea are once more adverted to and, firstly, enable an interlocking relation to emerge between human and nonhuman ecology.

The return to the natural and the search for ecological authenticity are also played out in literary historical fashion in *An Autumn Wind.* On at least two occasions, Mahon references the cultural politics of landscape traded under the Irish Literary Revival by Yeats and Synge. In "Synge Dying," Mahon presents a three-stanza first-person reflection by the playwright on his time spent on the Aran Islands, and the ensuing dramatic yields of his visits to those nonmodern fastnesses in the west of Ireland. In reading this short poem ecologically, it is worth attending to its close in the first instance, as the final three lines bring the reader into the declining present of the poetic speaker. The bed-bound and ailing dramatist ends his remembrance by pitching the grim verticality of his urban surroundings against the broad expansiveness of his erstwhile natural residence: "[N]ow from my pillows / my gaze travels / past smoking chimneys to the distant hills" (*AW,* 36). There are explicit Romantic cadences in the memorializing structure of the poem but also in this precise juxtaposition of the industrialized cityscape and the remote pastures of Ireland's west coast. These lines also invoke temporality; as stated, the poem's end sites us in Synge's fading present, but that the final line begins with "past" and then counterpoints the urban and the rural suggests a hierarchical spatialization of time. Under this schema, the urban represents the modern and progressive, whereas its opposite, the rural, recedes into prehistory and tradition. Of course, this unsustainable dichotomy was seized upon and redeployed for Irish cultural nationalist ends by the Irish cultural revival, but here Mahon appropriates this exemplary political and cultural movement in Irish history for his reflection on the aestheticization of the natural world.

"Synge Dying" is thus concerned with issues of time, geography, ecology, and memory but approaches each of these in terms of a moral struggle undergone by the visiting playwright. The poetic speaker recognizes the intrusive character of his visits and of his catalogs of the remoter climes of the Irish countryside, and admits to his participation in an ethically ambiguous cultural enterprise: "I didn't start it exactly but I was among / the first with bike and camera / to visit the wilder shores / of Kerry and Connemara / in search of old reality, stories, / folklore, traditional song" (*AW,* 36). Mahon adopts what appears to be a modern idiom of expression in voicing Synge's memories of his visits to the Aran Islands. The inclusion of modern gadgetry works in tandem with the apparent linguistic modernization and is consistent with Mahon's scoring of his poetry with the objects and the vocabulary of technological invention. But there is also a recognition implicit in the inventory of cultural forms, and in the ambiguous reference to "old reality," of the acquisitive urges of just such cultural tourism. Again, *old reality* alludes to the spatialization of time—Aran is a hoard of things past; it is stadially anterior to the historical narrative of urban modernity. The poem does not propose that there is a pristine nature onto which tourists and artists, like Synge and Lady Gregory, have transgressed. Instead, it critiques the aesthetic productions of transient tourists and artists, which tend to abstract the ecological relationships of such rural topographies.

Indeed, the use of "it" in the first line of the poem resonates beyond Synge's own time: within the context of the poem, "it" refers to the trend for visiting the Celtic peripheries favored during the Romantic period. But read in terms of the broader ecological impulse of Mahon's collection, and later poetry, the "it" could just as plausibly suggest all forms of intrusive cultural and economic interventions by humanity on vulnerable local populations and ecologies. And "Synge Dying" articulates definite moral uncertainty about the ethics of these cultural projects: "Not real to myself, a sick man fighting for life / in the fey breezes and raw winds, / I was in two minds / about my right to be there / writing up the rough holy ground, / the roads, the *ceili* and the hiring fair" (*AW,* 36). This middle stanza witnesses Synge emote feelings of conflict and distress, both internal and external. The opening sentence notes simultaneous psychological and physical complaints. The self struggles for recognition and identification because the impossibility of recovering and representing "old reality" is matched by a sense of identitarian unease on the part of the interloping author. The recollected crisis is furthered by the schizophrenic anxiety experienced on the ground, so to speak, on the Aran Islands. Synge's conflict is aptly measured by Mahon's crossed rich-rhyming of "right"

and "writing"—which conveys a sensitivity to the fraught link between representationalism and ecology in terms of a moral quandary.

Ritual and ground are referred to as the cultural and physical coordinates that Synge believes are victims of his physical trespass and of his subsequent literary productions. Yet the feeling remains that Mahon does not abhor or abjure the cultural but repeatedly insists upon artistic self-consciousness in exchanges with nonhuman ecology. In fact, as we arrive again at the end of the poem, we read, "But there in words I found / the living world I couldn't share" (*AW,* 36). Despite the personal anxiety and vexed ethics of artistic representation vocalized earlier in "Synge Dying," at this late stage the verbal and the sensual are reconciled, but in a state of accommodation that remains bounded by limits. Again Mahon's rhyme and diction produce ambiguity in these lines: on the one hand, we might intuit that Synge cannot "share" "there"—another telling crossed rich rhyme—with those who are external to it; that representation inevitably falters, no matter how effective and affective its aesthetic merits. On the other hand, Synge, the visiting scholar, is unable to "share" in the life and the embedded cultural mores that he encounters "there" on the Aran Islands. In either sense, we divine conflicted senses of attachment and distance, of limited access and outright externality, and of how faith in mimesis is continually tested and rewarded by the physical experience of the natural world.

Reflecting on the Roger Greene-directed *The Poetry Nonsense* (2010), Mahon recounts the various geographic locations revisited during the filming of the documentary. While the documentary, and the subsequent essay, "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama" (2012), foreground memory and biography, the latter displays Mahon's sensitivity to the economic and ecological spoliation of Ireland since the mid-1990s. "It was during this time . . ." he suggests "that the city transformed itself from the delightful dump it has always been into an enormous ATM, a coarse simulacrum of any post-modern market-driven money machine. Suddenly everything was multinational, bright, shiny, hard-edged and bad-tempered. Some got fiercely rich; suicide rates soared."[36] Mahon's critique is expressed effectively in the repeated compounded adjectives, as well as in the alliterated "money machine." Central to the ecological deformation of Dublin's cityscape is, of course, the short-lived and ruined Irish property "boom": "The building trade (the 'construction industry') boomed. The sky filled with high-rise cranes, the air with dust, curses, car alarms and yellow protective clothing. (This is one more 'global condition' of course: the whole world is a building site.)"[37] For Mahon, then, the lyric, poetry, offers a redemptive alternative to the prevailing ideologies of profit and

consumption. Taking his cue from his publisher and fellow poet Peter Fallon, Mahon impresses the resistant, utopian capacities of poetic expression: "Now that we inhabit a 'post-real' world, says my publisher Peter Fallon, 'I believe poetry prevails as a point of departure not *from* reality but *to* reality. . . . Be it epic or lyric, rock or rap, rhyme is the pre-linguistic drumbeat, a distant echo in the depths."[38]

Mahon continues in this reflective mood as he closes the essay, drawing on the insights of French poet Philippe Jaccottet,[39] who is dismissive of the crassness of critical theory, and of the linguistic contortions of deconstructive literary criticism, which devalue what he terms the "pure water drop" of poetry. From this position, and reiterating his faith in the redemptive agency of poetry, Mahon contends that poetic creativity, "the poetry nonsense," embodies

> the vague, instinctual resistance to a world engineered for the maximum "efficiency", competitive "growth", "global excellence" and "world-class" foolishness of all kinds. The poetry nonsense sets itself up against regulation, system, utility. It's a last ditch of sanity in a naff world of exploitation and lies. It has no function and no exchange value, unlike art and music. It is indeterminate, marginal, unimportant; and therein lies its importance. What we need is a dimmer, dreamier universe.[40]

Alive to the semiotics of consumerism and functionalism, Mahon retreats to and/or retrieves a formalist aesthetics, yet one that cannot but be political in its explicit disavowal of political intentionality. For Mahon, poetry is the peripheral alternative to the global consensus of commercialism, with its attendant deleterious environmental impacts. Such candor is not only a feature of Mahon's recent prose but is equally apparent in the final poem in *New Collected Poems* (2011), "Dreams of a Summer Night," originally published in *An Autumn Wind*.[41] Not only are this poem and the essay "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama" late professions on the integrity of poetic art and critiques of environmental catastrophe, references and exact phrases are repeated across both texts.

Silence, darkness, and dreams are some of the key features of "Dreams of a Summer Night," as the poetic voice muses alone while his neighbors sleep above his head. Yet, at the same time, the poem clamors with allusion, citation, intertextuality, and apostrophe. The poetic voice ventriloquizes the voices of culture and creativity in a closing act of resistance against the "noise" of "market forces [. . .] the global hurricane, the rule of money

[. . .]" (*NCP,* 372). Reprising, indeed repeating, the sentiments expressed in "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama," the poem asks, "Can we turn now to the important things / like visible scents, how even silence sings?" (*NCP,* 372). Mahon's sibilance in the latter line lyricizes the silence of this summer night, but he also furnishes a "soundtrack" for his meditation and for the poem: "young Mozart's Oboe Concerto, K.314" (*NCP,* 372). Mozart's piece, then, is not only a "soundtrack" but also a striking "key-note" for the remainder of the poem; the young composer's work initiates a process whereby Mahon invokes cultural exemplars such as Shakespeare's "gentle concord" (*NCP,* 373), Ingmar Bergman's "*Wild Strawberries*" (*NCP,* 373), Franz Kafka (*NCP,* 373), Gerard Manley Hopkins's "bleared, smeared with toil" (*NCP,* 374), and Constantin Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse" (*NCP,* 377).[42] This muscular cultural inventory is further supplemented by transhistorical references to figures including Edward Said, Amit Chaudhuri, Bishop Berkeley, and Franz Schubert.

So, though Mahon emphasizes *silence,* he emphatically articulates the vital cultural coordinates of his life and of this poem. In one respect, can we read such a strategy as a version of T. S. Eliot's closing lines in *The Waste Land* (1922); are these, for Mahon, "fragments I have shored against my ruins"?[43] Yet, a hopefulness is embedded within Mahon's verse. Despite the catalog of capitalistic artifacts that endanger and exploit the planet, Mahon retains an undimmed faith in the poetic act and repeats Fallon's remark that poetry is "a point of departure not from reality but to it" (*NCP,* 373), seen earlier in "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama."

Evidence of Mahon's continuing ecological interrogation is witnessed in his invocation of Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" (1877). As we have seen, the literary allusion is part of the poem's broader cultural armory, but, in context, it is also part of a direct ecocritical address:

> So many quiet shores "bleared, smeared with toil", / there's nowhere for a sticky duck to hide / from the unchecked invasion of crude oil / dumped on the sand by a once friendly tide; / and if they drill here what else do we gain / but a bonanza for an acquisitive crowd / of blow-hard types, determined, garish, loud? Would we ever get our old lives back again? (*NCP,* 374)

This short sequence is tightly structured in terms of its rhyme scheme, but just as telling is that Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" is in closed form itself, an Italian sonnet, though with a variable metric structure. Thus, Mahon's ecological intervention is once more, directly and indirectly,

mediated through structured poetic forms. The key rhyme here includes the quotation from Hopkins, between "toil" and "oil," and reminds us of at least four other poems addressed earlier in our discussion. "Oil" as pollutant and as a product, or resource, of geologic time appears in, in chronological order, "The Antigone Riddle," "A Garage in Co. Cork," "Homage to Gaia," and "Indian Garden." Thus, a complex of external literary reference and self-reference in a poem offers an extended utopian assertion of empathy and resistance. "Dreams of a Summer Night" closes just as "New York Time" opens—with the prospect of daybreak. As we saw at the outset of this discussion, the New York dawn is figured in terms of a disjointed urban chorus of sounds, the discordant notes of "the first bird and the first garbage truck" (*NCP,* 161). However, "Dreams of a Summer Night" ends with an acute sense of place and a matching sense of faith in the integrity of human and nonhuman ecology: "I await the daylight we were born to love: / birds at the window, boats on a rising wave, / light dancing on dawn water, the lives we live" (*NCP,* 377).

Eóin Flannery lectures in the Department of English Language and Literature at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland. He is the author of four books: Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice *(Routledge, 2016);* Colum McCann and the Aesthetics of Redemption *(Irish Academic Press, 2011);* Ireland and Postcolonial Studies: Theory, Discourse, Utopia *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and* Versions of Ireland: Empire, Modernity and Resistance in Irish Culture *(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006).*

NOTES

I thank Professor Steven Matthews for valuable comments on an early draft of this essay.

1. Derek Mahon, "New York Time," in *New Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 2011), 161–94, quotation on 161. All further references to "New York Time," and Mahon's other work prior to *Life on Earth* (2008) and *An Autumn Wind* (2008), are hereafter cited in text as *NCP.*
2. Hugh Haughton, "'The bright garbage on the incoming wave': Rubbish in the Poetry of Derek Mahon," *Textual Practice* 16, no. 2 (2002): 323–43, quotation on 324.
3. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.
4. Haughton traces the political awareness of the poet right back to his 1962 editorial contribution to *Icarus* magazine at Trinity College, Dublin (see ibid., 28).
5. In *The Poetry of Derek Mahon,* Haughton identifies Mahon's ecological consciousness as far back as his 1975 publication *The Snow Party:* "[I]n *The Snow Party* the sense of ecological catastrophe is consistently intertwined with historical disaster" (93).
6. Mahon's title references Dylan Thomas's post–World War II poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (1946), in *Collected Poems: 1934–1952*

(London: J. M. Dent, 1952), 94. For Mahon's discussion of Dylan Thomas, see Mahon's "Prospects of the Sea," in *Selected Prose* (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 2012), 149–59.

7. Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1999), 69. "The Apotheosis of Tins" has been excised from *New Collected Poems*.

8. Throughout, original ellipses are enclosed in square brackets.

9. As Hugh Haughton explains, the poem "began as a response to a postcard by Fritz Curzon of a decaying building named 'McGrotty's Garage'" (*Poetry of Derek Mahon,* 186).

10. On the Anthropocene epoch, see Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen, "The New World of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Science and Technology* 44, no. 7 (2010): 2228–31.

11. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222, quotation on 207.

12. Haughton, *Poetry of Derek Mahon,* 173.

13. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Introduction: The Critical Context," in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon,* ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs, vol. 11 (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 2002), 1–28, quotation on 5.

14. Fellow Belfast poet Michael Longley refers to Mahon's faith in formal structure in a recent interview: "[A]s Mahon always insists: no art without the resistance of the medium" ("Face to Face: Michael Longley," interview by Patrick Crotty, *Poetry Review* 103, no. 3 [2013]: 38–47, quotation on 46).

15. Derek Mahon, "Derek Mahon—The Art of Poetry No. 82," interview by Eamon Grennan, *Paris Review,* no. 154 (2000): 151–78, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/732/the-art-of-poetry-no-82-derek-mahon.

16. In the same interview with Grennan, Mahon makes a related point: "The habitual choice of a certain kind of form does describe a sensibility, so that a formalist poet's politics will also be formalist, in the sense that they will respect abstract notions of . . . I'm trying to avoid the words 'law and order'" (ibid., 168).

17. Derek Mahon, "Indian Ink," in *Selected Prose* (see note 6), 268–80, quotation on 270.

18. Ibid.

19. Lovelock credits the designation of the name Gaia to his friend, the novelist William Golding: "My contemporary and fellow villager, the novelist William Golding, suggested that anything alive deserves a name—what better for a living planet than Gaia, the name the Greeks used for the Earth Goddess?" (*The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth,* Commonwealth Fund Book Program [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 3).

20. James Lovelock, "Gaia as Seen through the Atmosphere," *Atmospheric Environment* 6, no. 8 (1972): 579–80, quotation on 579. Lovelock's other works on his Gaia hypothesis are *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); *Gaia: The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine* (London: Gaia Books, 1991); the autobiography *Homage to Gaia: The Life of an Independent Scientist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis & the Fate of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin 2006).

21. Lovelock, "Gaia as Seen," 579.

22. Ibid., 580.

23. James Lovelock, "Gaia: The Living Earth," *Nature* 426 (2003): 769–70, quotation on 770.

24. John McAuliffe, "An Appetite for the Large Themes of Life," *Irish Times,* 15 November 2008, B10.

25. Lucy Collins, "'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'—Derek Mahon" (1978), in "Poems that Matter, 1950–2000," special issue, ed. Peter Denman, *Irish University Review* 39, no. 2 (2009): 255–63, quotation on 262.

26. The address of "Radiant Energies" recalls Philip Larkin's poem "Solar" (1964) in *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 33.

27. Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 1991), 112.

28. Ibid., 112–13.

29. James Lovelock, "The Gaia Hypothesis," in *Environment,* vol. 1: *Thinking and Knowing about the Environment and Nature,* ed. Jules Pretty, 4 vols. (London: Sage, 2006), 3–22, quotation on 7–8.

30. Derek Mahon, "A Quiet Spot," in *An Autumn Wind* (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 2010), 17; hereafter cited in text as *AW.*

31. Eamonn Hughes, "Weird/Haecceity: Place in Derek Mahon's Poetry," in Kennedy-Andrews, *Poetry of Derek Mahon* (see note 13), 104–5.

32. Jonathan Steinwand, "What the Whales Would Tell Us: Cetacean Communication in Novels by Witi Ihimaera, Linda Hogan, Zakes Mda, and Amitav Ghosh," in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment,* ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 182–99, quotation on 182.

33. Ibid., 184.

34. Josh A. Weinstein, "Marianne Moore's Ecopoetic Architectonics," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 2 (2010): 373–88, quotation on 373.

35. Ibid., 386.

36. Derek Mahon, "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama," in *Selected Prose* (see note 6), 24–33, quotation on 31.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Mahon has translated Jaccottet's work: Philippe Jaccottet, *Selected Poems,* French Poetry in Translation Series (London: Penguin, 1986); and Philippe Jaccottet, *Words in the Air: A Selection of Poems by Philippe Jaccottet,* translation and introduction by Derek Mahon (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1998).

40. Mahon, "Poetry Nonsense," 33.

41. The poem's title echoes Ingmar Bergman's 1955 *Smiles of a Summer Night.* This is surely deliberate given the reference to Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957) in the poem itself.

42. The reference to Shakespeare is to the character of Theseus in, suitably, *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* act 4, scene 1. The nocturnal setting of Mahon's poem and the several references to dreams are other obvious intersections with Shakespeare's comedy.

43. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 59–80, quotation on 75.