AUTUMN SKIES

Writers on poems by Derek Mahon

Edited by Peter Fallon

Gallery Books

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Preface

'This iceberg cuts its facets from within.' This line from 'The Imaginary Iceberg' by Elizabeth Bishop, a poet much admired by Derek Mahon (see Sara Berkeley's essay, pages 111-112, or Derek's own 'Elizabeth Bishop' in *Washing Up*, 2020) might be as good a description as any of the workings of a Mahon poem as he locates the 'places where a thought might grow' and finds a fitting form for it. In poems such as the immaculate 'Antarctica' or indeed the fabled 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' the poem's idea enacts itself.

The hope of *Autumn Skies* — a phrase first mentioned in 'The Seasons' (*An Autumn Wind*, 2010) — was to present on the occasion of Derek Mahon's eightieth birthday a collection of responses to his poems by writers who have published with The Gallery Press. Alas, it has become a memorial tribute.

The contributors have approached the poems they've chosen in various ways: some offer close readings, some open to experiences prompted by the subject matter of the work. Frank McGuinness, a colleague once, presents biographical detail while recognizing and registering 'the slyest of echoing ironies' of what might be Mahon's best known poem, 'Everything Is Going to Be All Right' (100,000 views on YouTube), a theme Paul Muldoon in a strict, contrarian essay examines further, offering a welcome, corrective contextualization of this poem.

Although Derek Mahon didn't regard 'The Mute Phenomena' as a translation, imitation or adaptation (his translation of 'Vers dorés' appears in *Echo's Grove,* 2013) we are happy to include what might be Seamus Deane's last piece of criticism. It is a pleasant fancy to think that Seamus and Derek might be arguing that toss in their amused and brilliant banter.

The chosen poems include some of his very earliest, short and longer poems in different tones and forms, and

some of his very last. A feature of the collection is the responses of a number of younger writers. All this would have pleased Derek. Inevitably, there are references to, even reliances on, earlier versions of certain poems. (This mightn't.)

John Banville and Audrey Molloy, both with origins in our most south-eastern county, address 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', while Bernard O'Donoghue throws light on 'A Garage in Co. Cork'. Medbh McGuckian riffs on resonant, immortal lines from many poems in her consideration of 'Dawn at St Patrick's'. Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh is brought back by 'Global Village' to her time in New York City while Ciaran Berry, now resident in the US, reflects on 'Alien Nation'.

In my own essay I note the coherence of his work. Even in this almost random selection the trajectory of his work (and of his life) may be discerned — from the sense of knowing his place in the poem Caitríona Ní Chléirchín selects to John McAuliffe's choice 'Harbour Lights' which ends with 'to find the right place, find it and live forever' and in 'A Quiet Spot' to 'the perfect work-life balancing act / you've found after so many a fugitive year / of travel'.

Derek Mahon was a master — at once classical and right up to the moment. He is the one to learn from. Frank McGuinness's essay concludes with this apt assessment: 'He is Ireland's Montaigne and his work is for all time.'

— Peter Fallon
Loughcrew
August 2021

Spring in Belfast

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

There is a perverse pride in being on the side
of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.
We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill
at the top of every street, for there it is,
eternally, if irrelevantly, visible —

but yield instead to the humorous formulae,
the spurious mystery in the knowing nod;
or we keep sullen silence in light and shade,
rehearsing our astute salvations under
the cold gaze of a sanctimonious God.

One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
The things that happen in the kitchen houses
and echoing back streets of this desperate city
should engage more than my casual interest,
exact more interest than my casual pity.

Caitríona Ní Chléirchín
Spring in Belfast

At the heart of Derek Mahon's early poem 'Spring in Belfast' is a deep understanding and unconditional love for the 'desperate city' of Belfast. Just as love often accepts tragedy and imperfection, the poet accepts the 'sunlight between shower and shower' and 'sullen silence in light and shade' of his native city. The city becomes the internal location of emotion and memory, fragmented and complex, the city of the mind. As an exile from Belfast there's a feeling of isolation, loneliness and alienation in this poem, even if he is 'walking among [his] own'. Perhaps so, yet, like so many of us, never more alone, never further from home. The real question this poem makes us ask is what is home, where is it and how do we find it or accept it. Is 'the squinting heart' half closed or blinded by 'unwieldy images'? Has some part of the 'wet stone' entered that heart forever? Is there a sense of all the suffering he has tried to forget?

The God of the poet's understanding would seem to be cold and sanctimonious and the poet would prefer to be on the side of the fallen angels 'refusing to get up'. Eternity comes in the shape of the Black Mountain but is somehow irrelevant, although visible. Salvation may have been reached through keeping the mountain in view but instead the people yield to the everyday realities of life and survival in the city. When faced with the still sad music of humanity, the desolation of the human condition, the alternatives are 'humorous formulae', 'the spurious mystery in the knowing nod', 'sullen silence' or 'rehearsing our astute salvations'. The poet is not fooled by any of these and yet there is love for the 'echoing back streets', and a pity beyond all telling.

Is there something unspeakable or just mundane about 'the things that happen in the kitchen houses / and echoing back streets'? Is this ordinary, casual violence and cruelty? There's a strong feeling of a burden of duty and responsibility in the last two lines, even more so for the use of the word 'casual': 'should engage more than my casual interest, / exact more interest than my casual pity'. As it does, in my view.

We see at work here one part of the mind that observes the other, a contradictory, troubled soul that feels the duty of love and care: 'One part of my mind must learn to know its place.' The internalized authoritarian inner father voice is stark, harsh, formulaic, sombre and yet loving. The emphasis is on 'must' and 'should'. The poet sees and knows on many levels, even when he tries not to.

The 'desperate city' is not just Belfast, but the poet and his inner father figure. He holds a stark mirror up to himself and his people. The gaze is intense, unrelenting. Something of the unbearable pain comes across without ever being mentioned explicitly. Northern silence, northern reticence and glimpses of light among the shadows and pain echoes.

Mahon questions *all*.