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**'The Green Line in the Poetry of Derek Mahon'**

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(Article begins on next page)

# A Warm Mind-Shake

Scritti in onore di Paolo Bertinetti

*a cura del Dipartimento  
di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne  
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te, talvolta drammatico, ma felicemente risolto per il piacere del pubblico. Proprio come la Munro pensava di costruire il suo ipotetico *musical*.

Così si sono incrociate, per me, la gradevole lettura delle novelle della Munro e la conclusione di una lunga attività scientifica. L'ultimo lavoro a cui ho lavorato nella mia presenza in Facoltà è stata infatti l'edizione della lunga *pièce* di Hardy, proseguita poi negli anni successivi con l'aiuto di alcune collaboratrici, specialiste della Letteratura Francese del XVII secolo, che ancora lavorano nel Dipartimento<sup>5</sup>. Proprio per questo mi è parso utile evocare in questa sede – esplicitamente dedicata a chi ha creato e gestito la vecchia/nuova Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere – la mia presenza nella Facoltà stessa e la prosecuzione che alcune mie allieve continuano a portare avanti.

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<sup>5</sup> Insieme ad altri collaboratori esterni, segnalo Laura Rescia e Monica Pavesio.

## THE GREEN LINE IN THE POETRY OF DEREK MAHON

Irene De Angelis

It was Professor Jonathan Bate, in his Michael Donaghy Lecture at St. Anne's Oxford University in 2006, who first spoke of the "Green Line" in contemporary British and Irish Poetry. Indeed, from *Night Crossings* which came out in 1968, to the 2010 *An Autumn Wind*, Mahon has never ceased to voice his concern about the many forms of ecological danger that threaten our environment; nor to clarify their connection with moral, social and political situations. The epigraph of 'Roman Script', drawn from Pasolini's poem 'Gramsci's Ashes', runs: 'In the refuse of the world a new world is born'. In this paper I shall try to bring out how deeply Mahon feels the close connection between refuse (disregarded objects) and "the people refused" or rejected by society.

Let me start with 'Glengormley' (1968), which is about the district in Belfast where Mahon was born and brought up. In this poem he describes not the "new era", freed from monsters and giants of old Irish mythology, but the attractions of the new Prime Minister O'Neil's promised innovations: 'a new motorway, a new airport, a new hospital and a replacement of derelict slums by a modern housing estate.' (Hugh Houghton 2007, 36) As he points out in 'Spring in Belfast' (1968) 'by necessity, if not by choice, I live here too'; so he was not taken in by all this "whitening of sepulchres", nor taken by surprise when, despite these attempts to dispel the growing social discontent, the Troubles broke out a few years later (while 'the hill at the top of every street' looked down unmoved). He did believe the warning of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, that wars and indiscriminate use of pesticides would lead to a world of desolation from which bird-song would be banished. In response he imagines a bird sanctuary, where all kinds of birds can live until they are strong enough to fly to the city and shout their protest from the rooftops ('Bird Sanctuary', *NCP* 21).

Two poems in *The Snow Party* (1975) are particularly forceful in their presentation of Mahon's Green Line: 'The Apotheosis of Tins' and 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. The former is written in prose poetry, with the tins themselves as the narrators, representatives of all the waste products man disregards. Anticipating the 'transient good' concept of Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, Mahon describes the tins as 'im perishable by-products of the perishable will' (1975, 27), objects deprived of use, which no longer serve the purpose they were made for. As Italo Calvino foresaw in *Le città invisibili*, they threaten to submerge the planet, for they continue, label-less but indestructible, to bear witness to man's passing through this world.

'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' ranges hugely over space and time, depicting the consequences of oppression, persecution and destruction: unspeakable squalor, deprivation and dereliction, in provincial Europe (Wexford) or sophisticated antiquity (the natural catastrophe of Pompeii), exhausted mines of Peru or lost Indian grandeur. Then it homes in on the shed in the grounds of a hotel burned down 'in civil war days', which ended in 1923, just half a century before Mahon wrote this poem. Since then 'a thousand mushrooms' have been left with no light but what filters through the keyhole and their mycologist-owner (probably Protestant) has been expropriated and never come back. After such long years of suffering, they only have the strength to meet the 'firing-squad' with 'the ghost of a scream', joining with 'the lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii' to beg the intruders ('with your electric light') or the poet ('with your light-hearted, not ponderous, poetry') 'not to close the door again', to save them from everlasting death.

*The Hunt by Night* (1982) contains two very fine "ecological" poems: 'Ovid in Tomis' and 'A Garage in Co. Cork.' The former presents a kind of technological metamorphosis of some Greek God into a gearbox abandoned by the roadside and a nereid into an unsinkable Coca Cola tin. Syntinx, having been transformed into a reed by Pan, is petrified at the idea of being thrown into a modern pulping machine and made into paper or cording for motor car tyres. In such a world 'Pan is dead' and poetic inspiration reduced to silence.

In 'A Garage in Co. Cork' the connection between junk and human destinies is very well brought out. For this one-time roadside oasis once housed a family forced to emigrate, who still think of it as home; though

beside puddles, cracked panes and tyres in the branches, there is only a heap of

building materials, fruit boxes, scrap iron,  
dust-laden shrubs, and coils of rusty wire,  
a cabbage white fluttering in the sodden  
silence of an untended kitchen garden –  
(2011: 121)

and the eternal petrol pumps standing side by side like some old couple. Here Mahon is no longer anticipating but going along with Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*.

Thirteen years after *The Hunt by Night* comes *The Hudson Letter* (1995). It is the fruit of a five-year sojourn in New York. Mahon's first, and lasting impression coincided with that of Camus: 'a desert of iron and cement in an island' (2011: 161). The noisy, chaotic city is not conducive to the practice of his 'writing trade'. Even in the early morning, the song of the 'first bird' was drowned out by the arrival of the 'garbage truck'. This is followed in the second section of the letter by a continual blare of sirens, the howling of dogs and the general hubbub of the streets. In this "hypertrophic city" nature is degraded by puddles of pollution and seagulls in flight from the cement to patches of urban green (Bertoni 2000: 24). Even the Hudson River is jammed with trash and refuse barges, 'industrial pre-history' (Bertoni 2000: 26) which, together with the 'rain infection', makes the poet complain, in Rachel Carson tones 'I can hear no Jersey blackbird serenade [...] on the Big Apple side'. He sees a bleak, threatening future for the planet earth, in which 'the sun / shines on the dump, not on the *côte d'azur*'. Having given us an aerial view of New York, with its asbestos roofs crowded with listless birds and its streets of enormous, smelly heaps of garbage, Mahon the 'undesirable resident alien' finally takes a look at the homeless human refuse / relicts / pariahs who live 'in the restless dark'. In spirit he joins the ranks of these unfortunate, as he says 'we are all survivors [...] I've no problems in calling you my brothers'. This sense of solidarity with the drop-outs of society is more heart-felt than ever in the greatest American rubbish-dump of a metropolis where he is so constantly led to ponder the very concept of home and belonging.

'Roman Script', published in 1999 after a four-month stay in Rome the year before, also contains social and ecological enquiry. As I said at



the beginning of this paper, the epigraph is a quotation from Pier Paolo Pasolini's poem 'Gramsci's Ashes': 'In the refuse of the world a new world is born'. Like Pasolini, Mahon "celebrates" the "other" Rome, where the lives of the rejected are relegated, stunted by conditions among the 'peripheral rubbish dumps':

starlight and tower blocks on waste ground,  
peripheral rubbish dumps beyond the noise  
of a circus, where sedated girls and boys  
put out for a few bob on some building site  
in the cloudy imperium of ancient night  
and in the ruins, among disconsolate lives  
on the edge of the artful city, a myth survives.  
(CP 276)

Drugs addiction and paid sex become the inevitable products of this waste-land.

Critics, including Haughton<sup>1</sup>, tend to give the impression that Rome's decadence is confined to these suburban areas (and a few night-clubs). I would say that though they are the most obvious expression of it, this decadence runs through the whole poem, from the pompous (porous) traverse façades of the homes of the wealthy, soaking up quantities of the city's smog, with worm-eaten furniture and moth-eaten clothes reflecting inner decay; to the deplorable "moral" life-styles of Popes in venial gyms; to the falsity and vacuity of the old-style fetishism ('a glove [...] a blouse') which reified women and tried to subject them to the domination of men, within the four walls they called 'home' ('RS' stanza 9).

To return to Pasolini, who is himself the "myth" that survives in that nightmare scenario. His martyrdom on the beach at Ostia is sometimes connected, not least by Haughton, with 'the bright garbage on the incoming wave'. The idea is poetical but does not correspond to the way he was 'mangled' ('Quaderno', stanza 6). This took place entirely on the 'sand and ash' and ended with a car being driven over his body as he lay there dying. The 'bronze bird-shape', placed as a memorial among the trash, bears witness to the gratitude of people world-wide, who recognize his courage in defending the 'true direction' that could save (could have

<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, this study owes a great deal to Hugh Haughton's scholarly 2002 essay "The Bright Garbage on the Incoming Wave: Rubbish in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", and to his 2007 OUP volume *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*.

saved?) our world. He was not alone. His efforts were shared by supporters of *Italia Nostra* (Bassani and others) set up to protect much-neglected Italian art and culture.

'High Water', another poem that grew out of the visit to Italy, emphasizes the importance of sound pollution in Mahon's Green Line. It recalls how he went to Venice 'starved for pedestrian silence' (and obviously in flight from the hubbub of Rome, including its harsh human voices) only to find a perpetual high tide of 'Year round tourism now' and inhale 'a bracing sea-stench from the rotting piles.'

'Insomnia' also insists on sound-pollution in a post-industrial world, symbolized by the 'roaring rotors and gas rigs' that wake the poet up in the night ('twenty minutes to four' by the clock). The urban scene also includes 'a shipyard' (a familiar childhood memory), while the sky-line is made of 'chimneys, power-plants, gasometers, oil refineries, Gothic spires' (the latter obviously being neo-Gothic) (2008: 23). The country, as we know, is not exempt from the ecological evils of the city. Alongside 'rising' spring crops 'A Country Road' (NCP 309) places 'Abandoned trailers, sunk in leaves and turf, / slow erosion, waves on the boil', reminding us that 'we belong to this ... [we are] born / participants in the action', while 'Dark energies ... fling farther the red-shifting gas'. Even the grouse sheltering in the grass sense this danger and cry out against it (2008: 42).

The nine sections of 'Homage to Gaia' (NCP 311) all concentrate on the 'dark energies' that are destroying our natural environment. The title is taken from the title of the autobiography of James Lovelock (1919-) who elaborated the theory of the living planet Gaia. 'Its radiant energies', the first section, is a hymn to the solar (photovoltaic) panel which could usher in a 'post-petroleum age' and rescue us from global warming. The panels, turning their many faces sky-wards, seem to be worshipping this new source of life on earth. The second section of 'Homage to Gaia' contains a plea to 'great Gaia our first mother', to forgive us humans who have destroyed the woods, spread oil-slicks over the seas 'to grow far' (that is, to make large profits), while she has 'done so much for us', we have 'upset the natural world'. Beautiful suspension-bridges are no excuse for the columns of black smoke that are suffocating our world.

'Wind and Wave' looks at another source of clean, alternative energy, wind-farms and tidal energy. Though some modern Don Quixotes complain of the noise of the wind-farms, this source of energy is infinitely

renewable; though so far tidal energy has been relatively little used, it does not seem to present disadvantages.

Apart from the 'rain' of nuclear fall-out, another great menace is the violent rainstorms caused by global warming. In 'London Rain' Mahon calls it 'corporate and imported', enough to 'swamp a continent'. It is becoming an ever-more frequent cause of catastrophe, no longer confined to tropical climates. The Inuit Icelandic singer Björk has made global warming one of her main themes ('Homage to Gaia' section 7). Mahon admires her for savagely defending her privacy and for her aim 'to knock / aside the expectations / of corporate brainwash rock' (music, of course). He feels that Björk does not play for the 'civilized' world, but to the vast spaces of the Arctic, her homeland, where 'corrugated iron roofs' do little to defend her people against arctic temperatures. Björk is certainly conscious of

Sea levels rising annually,  
glaciers sliding fast,  
species extinct, the far north  
negotiable at last ... (2008: 55)

A note of hope dominates in 'Dirigibles', section 8 of 'Homage to Gaia'. The beauty of these great airships still fascinates the world, even now when they hover quietly above a world vastly different from the one they were born into. From their vantage point they can see what is going on in financial centres, high-rise flats, open-plan offices or cocktail bars. Famous failures and catastrophes in the dirigible world have now been forgotten, so that in future these 'nearly silent drifters' will come into vogue again, allowing

...slow idealists  
[to] gaze at re-frozen ice,  
reflourishing rain forests,  
the oceans back in place;  
at sand and stars, blue skies  
clear water, scattered light  
(NCP 324)

*Life on Earth* is Mahon's homage to Lovelock. The message of *An Autumn Wind* (2010) is nearer to the scientist's latest book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia, A Final Warning: Enjoy It While You Can* (2009). Two months after

*An Autumn Wind* came out Paul Batchelor wrote a review of it in *The Guardian* (8.5.2010). In it he said that 'The Thunder Shower' illustrates 'rain's [...] ability to unite classes and cultures'. That seemed to me to contradict the central idea of the poem, that the thunder shower symbolizes the destructive power of the industrial and financial worlds ('cascading world economy'), which becomes even more explicit in the following verse (seven), where Baal (the false god) is 'raging [...], frantic to crush and re-impose his failed hegemony on Canaan. It also seemed to ignore the 'angry, growling downpour', and the bitter last line, where the storm 'has lost interest in us'; as well as Naomi Klein's condemnation, in her *The Shock Doctrine*, of 'the Chicago Boys, the World Bank and the IMF', mentioned in 'World Trade Talks' (*An Autumn Wind* 23).

After careful re-reading I realized that 'the weak / who now fight back' against 'genocidal mischief' ('World Trade Talks' verse 2) include the professional and intellectual classes, lawyers and doctors as well as the ordinary, common-sense people who support Greenpeace and go on protest marches; or Indian women who embrace trees to try to prevent forests being felled; and that in Italy, as a country, we voted against nuclear power stations.

'World Trade Talks' contains a clear protest against another terrible 'genocidal threat': genetically modified crops, which would mean death even to the trembling 'hare in the corn ... [which] survives ... by lying low.' The moral condemnation of this new invention imposed on the weak is emphasized by the fact that the Japanese believe the hare is a sacred creature 'projected on the full moon' when it is clear.

Between 'The Thunder Shower' and 'World Trade Talks' there is a crack through which we can catch a glimpse of how a simple, serious upbringing (see 'Antrim Road'), despite the pressures of global pollution, despite the will of the powerful to 'crush the self-sufficient spaces' ('The Thunder Shower'), can lead to the Tolstoyan life-style pictured in 'New Space'. There the coach-house studio and converted stable loft look onto 'neat rows / laid out to raise the beans and peas, / rosemary, parsley, sage and thyme', recalling Yeats's 'nine bean-rows' in *Innisfree* and Voltaire's *Candide*, who concluded (in the very last words of the book) that 'we must look after the garden'.

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INGANNARE IL TEMPO CON IL TEMPO:  
LA PASSIONE DI J.B. PRIESTLEY  
PER LA QUARTA DIMENSIONE

Paola Della Valle

*Anche un orologio fermo segna l'ora giusta due volte al giorno.*

*Tutto è relativo. Prendete un substracenterario che rompe uno specchio: sarà ben lieto di sapere che ha ancora sette anni di disgrazie.*

Hermann Hesse

Albert Einstein

John Boynton Priestley (1894-1984) è stato uno dei più prolifici e versatili scrittori inglesi del XX secolo. Giunto alla notorietà nel 1929 con il romanzo *The Good Companions*, un best seller che riscosse un enorme successo, nel trentennio successivo scrisse una quarantina di opere per il teatro. Resta ancor oggi un enigma perché la critica e l'accademia lo abbiano così spesso trascurato o sminuito, nel passato come nel presente, etichettandolo come autore poco innovativo, commerciale o populista. Sicuramente Priestley non partecipò alle avanguardie, né seguì i dettami del movimento modernista imperante negli anni della sua ascesa. La sua prosa, ricca e travolgente, deve più a Dickens che non a Joyce. Non v'è dubbio, invece, che nel teatro sia stato uno sperimentatore, senza però rinunciare all'azione e a un dialogo avvincente, a trame ben congegnate e a un ritmo veloce. Tristemente nota è la definizione data da Virginia Woolf di Priestley come "tradesman of letters" (il commerciante delle lettere) e riportata nei suoi diari. D'altro canto la stessa Woolf, qualche riga sopra, aveva candidamente ammesso il suo pregiudizio sull'autore, confessando di non aver mai letto né di aver intenzione di leggere nessun libro di Priestley.

Sincero sostenitore della causa socialista, interessato alla psicologia Jungiana e alle teorie del tempo che erano seguite alle leggi della relatività di Einstein, Priestley voleva verificare le possibilità del testo drammaturgico su questi temi. Il successo di *The Good Companions*, gli aveva assicurato la stabilità economica e poteva quindi permettersi di sperimentare