
Tradition and the (Re)Writing of Poetry in *Roman Script* by Derek Mahon

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Abstract: This paper aims at showing in what way artistic and historical traditions constitute for Derek Mahon a fundamental element of poetic writing, which is perhaps only a form of rewriting. Our purpose will follow three main lines: first the matter of form, which appears to be traditional in many respects; the second part will belong to the order of representation, in so far as the poem contains a return to artistic and historical sources placed in a contrapuntal mode. The third aspect of this analysis will deal with what proves to be a quest for the ultimate, a reflection on creation. By way of consequence, writing becomes the very subject of the poem.

Key words: sonnet, intertextuality, history, cinema, photography, representation, reality, creation

In *Roman Script*, first published separately in June 1999, then included with a few variants in *Collected Poems*¹, and finally published some time later in *Selected Poems*, another cultural world, Italy which Shelley called “the paradise of exiles”, serves as a source of inspiration to the poet and forms a kind of bridge towards other perspectives. Ireland is thus inscribed in counterpoint² in this new favoured domain. The poems which end *Collected Poems* – “Ghosts”, “A Dirge” and the Roman sequence *Roman Script* – are completed by translations or adaptations of Italian writers, the poets of Italian Renaissance, Ariosto et Michelangelo, and two poets of the twentieth century, Saba and Pasolini. *Roman Script* concludes with what is entitled “A Rewrite”, which is a version of the self-referential sonnet by the eighteenth century Italian librettist and poet, Pietro Trapassi Metastasio. In the original sonnet, the theme of the ambiguity between

reality and fiction is added to that of the fusion between life and art which is destined to terminate only with one’s very existence. Translation here provides Mahon with an uncommon means of virtual creation, “even”, according to Hugh Haughton, “as he comments on it in this brilliant satire upon modern fictions.”(Haughton 2002: 180)

Derek Mahon belongs, in this poem more than elsewhere it seems, to a multiple tradition, which is a source of artistic renewal, a tradition that is at the same time literary, musical but also cinematographic. Superposed to the geographic space symbolised by Rome, there unfolds as a backcloth an imaginary space placed under the aegis of one of the most controversial figures of Italian literature and cinema: Pier Paolo Pasolini who, significantly, is quoted in the epigraph. Past writers, Yeats notably, make a comeback in the poem and are reviewed.

Mahon has always paid great attention to the visual aspect as much as the sonorities of a poem. As he declared in an interview: “it’s my own experience that writing is a visual experience as well as an aural one. It’s

important to me what a poem looks like on the page” (Brown 2002: 117). The June 99 edition is framed by two drawings by an Irish contemporary artist, Anne Madden, which are placed in a mirror-like fashion at its beginning and end. It represents an antic portal and this inverted position leaves the reader in doubt or uncertainty as to its symbolical representation: could it be an opening or a closure? This drawing also evokes other works by this artist, “Door into the Dark”³ or “Portail” both achieved in 1982, these openings being “metaphors of the artist’s vision, as well as openings into possible space, psychic and physical, inner and outer, of the mind and of matter”, as she explained in an interview.⁴

Like the drawings, the poem articulates the black and white on the surface of the page and shows a form that can be described as a sequence of eleven units of eight iambic pentameters each, completed by a sonnet. The eleven stanzas are characterised by their regularity as much in their metrical organisation as in their final rhymes, or couplet rhymes, except for stanza nine which is made up of a quartet of enclosed rhymes, and this introduces an element of fantasy which does not put into question the cohesion of the whole. Such couplet rhymes tend to articulate the discourse into the shape of separate distiches, which lends itself quite well to the expression of a well-structured thought. In many ways therefore, *Roman Script* can be seen as a narrative poem in which the poet occupies centre stage and depicts a day of his life in Rome, both “the eternal city” and “the artful city”. The rigid architecture of the poem associates echoes from the past fixed into the motionless moths lit up by an autumnal sunset, or the marble limbs of the statue of a Greek goddess from the underworld, and the fugitive visions of a present that cannot be arrested like the flickering lamplights of Trastevere, a sort of Latin Quarter favoured by the poet, or the fast cars of Fiat and Maserati. Each of these stanzas thus arrests a particular moment, a picture, from the evocation of dawn over the Janicular, the birth of a world, which echoes the final picture, that of the last moments of the poet Pasolini on a beach of Ostia near Rome. This ultimate picture concludes on the repeat in English of the Italian epigraph: “In the refuse of the world a new world is born” (276). One exception is notable: a semi-colon separates or rather links the ninth and tenth

stanzas devoted to Pasolini. The passage from one stanza to the next gives the poem its momentum, while leaving the reader with the leisure to continue his walk or linger here and there as the walking poet invites him to do: “Snap out of your art fatigue and take a trip / to church and basilica, forum, fountain and frieze” (275).

If the repetition of one stanza model combining a given number of lines, a certain restraint and a specific system of final rhymes constitute the main factor of regularity in *Roman Script*, stanza twelve brings an effect of rupture under the form of a sonnet entitled “A Rewrite”, and subtitled “After Metastasio”. This rupture is amplified by the use of the first person, which is self-referential, while the imperative tense or the second and third personal pronouns used in the eleven preceding stanzas stressed the indeterminate nature or a distancing of a somewhat ironic narrator: “Type up the new stuff, nap between four and five / when for the second time you come alive / with flies that linger in November light” (274). Contrary to the original sonnet in which the quatrains and tercets used the same rhymes, Mahon uses a more varied rhyming pattern, placed on a contrapuntal mode with an enclosed pattern. The three gaps between the quatrains and tercets in the Italian sonnet have been reduced to just one, in the aim of concision and also echo to the preceding stanzas. The sonnet is not a form favoured by Mahon since one finds no more than four other examples in *Collected Poems*.⁵ Such a form “lends itself more easily to lyricism and meditation, being self-enclosed” (Suhamy 1970: 145).⁶ In *Roman Script*, Mahon thus goes back to a poetic tradition he had somewhat abandoned in favour of another, that of the verse letters, in his works published in the nineties, *The Hudson Letter* and *The Yellow Book*.

Roman Script reveals its intertextual inscription as early as the epigraph in Italian: “*Nel rifiuto del mondo nasce un nuovo mondo*”. At this outpost so to speak, Mahon lays down his cards and points out the original space of the text, as much a geographical one, here the refuse and detritus of the world but also the relics and ruins of history, as a literary space since it is a quotation from the poet and film director Pasolini. This evasive and enigmatic preliminary indication has no other purpose than to indicate the literary backcloth to the

text and to suggest a reading approach. The epigraph is here at the same time “a symbol (the relation of a text to another, as a logical and homological relation), an index, (the relation of the text with an ancient author to which it attributes a leading function), and an icon, in the sense of a privileged way of entering into the discourse” (Compagnon 1979: 337).⁷ As a backcloth to *Roman Script* there unfolds a multiple space placed under the aegis of Pasolini, author of poems such as *Gramsci's Ashes*, of novels like *The Violent Life* or of provocative films such as *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*, an artist who died as he had lived, at variance with his times.

The ancients make a comeback in Mahon's poem and are reviewed, not only those from mythology and ancient Roman history, but also those from Irish history, thus the figure Hugh O'Neill, forever exiled after the defeat of Kinsale:

Rome of conspiracy theories and lost causes,
Exiles have died here in your haunted palaces
Where our own princes, flushed with wine
and hope,
They say, and the squeal of a lone bagpipe
Torn from the hazy, restless western ocean,
Dreamed up elaborate schemes of restoration
– (273)

Each word tends to have an aura of semantic multiplicity. The literary allusions are made almost systematically of a contrapuntal mode. Thus the noises made by the prisoners during their daily outing, to whom Mahon gives the now well-known appellation within a postcolonial context – “the wretched of the earth”–, serve touristic purposes: “for even the wretched of the earth are here to entertain the visitor” (273). When Mahon exclaims in the last stanza, which is literally a rewriting of a sonnet by Metastasio, “Ah, but words on the page aren't the whole story” (277), he alludes to one of his mentors, W.B. Yeats, who wrote in one of his early poems, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd”: “Words alone are certain good” (Yeats, 1933: 8). There may also be of course a form of self-reference since in the poem entitled “Glengormley”, dating from the eighties, one can read: “Only words hurt us now” (14). Derek Mahon purports to reread and link together voices that are to be found in greater and greater numbers: “Others were here, *comunque*, who dreamed in youth / of a society based on faith and truth” (275). The

language used is both reflexive and multilingual, for while questioning itself, as we shall see later on, it is full of ideological and discursive components, or still of literary allusions and influences. In this certainty that the image is syntactical and not a reflection of reality, Mahon holds himself at the periphery of things and the world: “a glib post-war cynicism restyled as image” (275).

Though the theme of photography is only present in a fugitive way, by evoking the photographic image, Mahon situates the debate on the most extreme edge of mimesis and continues to interrogate the analogical function of language: “seize / real presence, the art-historical sublime, / in an intricate owl-blink Nikon moment of time, / in a flash-photography lightning storm above / Cecilia's actual body, Endymion's actual grave” (275). One can find again here an echo of a poem by Keats, *Endymion*, in which the shepherd of the legend is not sent to an eternal sleep but flees in company of the moon goddess, Phoebe. One notices, in a significant way, that the first edition of *Roman Script* bore the name of Hyperion, dispossessed by Apollo after meeting Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. In other words the poet himself there acceded to divinity. Mahon has probably intended to replace a god with a mortal being. Similarly, the body of the patron saint of music, Cecilia, becomes more real in a death that immortalises her. As an external process imported into poetic discourse, photography is set so to speak at the beginning of the walk of the poet, like a relay between the referent and representation but also as a tool allowing for the revelation of some unsuspected reality. The evocation of photography makes it possible for the debate to alter its descriptive basis.

Between tradition and experimentation, Mahon's poetry questions the phenomena of distortion and resemblance within the artistic representation of the world: “the Respighi moment, life mimicking art again / as when the fiddles provoke line-dancing rain” (273). In the symphonic poem “The Fountains of Rome”, dating from 1924, Otorino Respighi set to music four Roman fountains at different moments of the day. With the evocation of the fountain of Trevi at midday, the brass instruments suggest the greatness of the monument, while the rapid scales played by the strings and the woods imitate the rush of the water. An evocation of Respighi's already

occurred in the first part of *The Hudson Letter*, at daybreak over Manhattan:

Respighi's temperate nightingale on WQXR
pipes up though stronger stations through the
ether –
a radio serendipity to illustrate
the resilience of our lyric appetite,
carnavalesque and studiously apart. (187)

The interrogation is double, ontological as well as aesthetic, the purpose of the poet being to redefine the concept of reality. Although he allows for deep distrust as to the feasibility of any discourse, "I've more sense when not deceived by art" (276), Mahon evokes in filigree its metafictional dimension by breaking up his narration of the past, so as to centre better on the theme of manipulation and falsification: "the lost years when we used to fall in love / not with women themselves but some commodity" (275).

The cinema, symbolised by Cinecitta, the studios of Rome, then becomes the point of reference of the poet's creative thought:

And we walk in reality, framed as virtuality,
as in a film-set, Cinecitta, a cinema city
where life is a waking dream in broad daylight
and everything is scripted for our delight.
(275)

The vertigo engendered by this perpetual confusion between the real and its simulacra cannot be overcome. The games of illusion nevertheless continue to serve the spectacle and the feast, before being transposed into a poetic universe where, behind the beauty of ancient Rome is depicted the reality of a disquieting universe haunted by death and simulacrum in which there seems to linger the spectre of an Ireland in the grip of globalisation: "production values, packaged history, / the genocidal corporate imperative / and the bright garbage on the incoming wave / best seen at morning rush-hour in driving rain" (276). Reality, decomposed by the shimmering of the light, is multiplied into images, which, in their turn, superpose their own systems. The distinction is lost between the world and its representations, the presence of things and their absence, so as to constitute a general network of optical illusions: "starlight and tower blocks on waste ground, / peripheral rubbish dumps behind the noise of a circus" (276). The modern hero finds himself astray among this proliferation of images in which truth and illusion are intermingled. More than a sign of verisimilitude, the light appears as a

factor of unreality and artifice, in so far as it contributes to isolate a remaining fragment of the dark space. This is to what the poet turns after contemplating the sun rise:

Turn back into the room where sunlight shows
Dim ceilings, domino tiles, baroque frescoes,
A scenic interior, a theatrical space
For Byronic masquerade or Goldoni farce,
Vapours and swordsmanship, the cape and fan,
The amorous bad-boy and the glamorous nun,
Boudoir philosophy, night music on balconies,
The gondola section nodding as in a sea
breeze. (273)

The world has become merely a theatrical stage on which are played eternal comedies haunted by the phantoms of the past, our life is but a cinema screen against which are silhouetted images of human agitation, as in Plato's cave: "for at this hour / the beautiful and damned are in Harry's Bar / or setting out for pit-stops, sexy dives / and parties, as in the movie of our lives" (274). The allusion to Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, published in 1922, which depicts a rich and extravagant couple whose marriage is headed towards failure, underlines the factitious character of the quest for glory. The effect of reality does not come from the illusion of a perfect resemblance or simulation, as the spectators are well aware of such an approximation, but "it is borne by a hitherto uncommon time which gives credit to such images" (Schefer 1980: 158-9).⁸ The pranks of past emperors as well as those of other representatives of another more contemporary religious system – "raping young ones in the venial gym" (274) –, are superposed to those of the romantic egotist, Don Giovanni, emblematic of the condition of being, while awaiting maybe for a new life or a rebirth, a recreation of the world, a rewriting, "A Rewrite".

The various metamorphoses of the poetic representation might seem to have reached an end if Mahon did not superimpose on it a new and last upsurge by introducing within the very architecture of the text an emotion, which is a factor of uncertainty, this emotion caused by a virtual fever of poetic creation that characterises him and of which the final sonnet is emblematic. "Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues and / To this returns" (Stevens 1965: 54); this line quoted from a poem by Wallace Stevens might as well apply to Mahon's poem. Poetry become a

quest for truth, peace, but true life seems to be elsewhere, as Rimbaud said in another time. Without any temporal location that might contribute to define the moment of enunciation, the poetic discourse seems condemned to the unutterable and become an errant word, unattached, moving along with a strength of its own: “I invent dreams and stories, and even as I outline / dreams and romances on the unwritten page / I enter into them with so soft a heart / I weep at evils of my own design” (276). The words are “those wanderers of the real, those categories of the possible, those elements without any past or future” (Bonnefoy 1980: 178).⁹

The poem becomes a risky and visionary attempt to get to some impossible space, which also seems something unutterable and there only remains the voice of the poet, a toneless or broken voice no more consistent than his own life: “the whole course of my life has been imagination, / my days a dream” (277). The text is built over an absence, a void caused by an impossible reference: “Ah, but words on the page aren’t the whole story / for all my hopes and fears are fictions too” (277). The ultimate wish to “wake from history”, appears as a form of defiance cast to the future of humanity, but also of hope: “when we wake from history / may we find peace in the substance of the true” (277). The work is here seen as another history which is opposed to the history on the surface, in order to convert itself into anti-history. The poet, in search of what is all but unattainable finally reaches a point of no-return when at last, in an unexpected and precarious way, what seemed not to be, takes place: “and rage, / love, genuine emotions, spring for once / from real life and from felt experience” (276). The opening which occurs in this acquiescence to negativity (“words on the page aren’t the whole story”) corresponds, on the linguistic level, to the loss of a priority situated in the referent, and refers precisely to the impossibility for poetic art to appropriate

anything substantial for itself, the work of art being fallacious, like the paintings of the Sistine Chapel whose colours evoke those of comic strips full of violence: “the Sistine Chapel’s violent comic strip” (275). On the level of figurative language, this loss of substance becomes a liberation, an opening into new spaces whose example is to be found in the myth of the poet – of poverty, internment –, the second person pronoun encompassing the poet and his contemporaries or coevals: “His is the true direction we have lost / since his corpse showed up on the beach at Ostia”. (276)

According to Gaston Bachelard, a poem “weaves the real and the unreal” (Bachelard 1957: 17).¹⁰ The poetic function is “to give a new form to the world which exists only if it is forever re-imagined” (Bachelard 1942: 81).¹¹ One may say that one dreams before contemplating: “Before being a spectacle every landscape is an oneiric experience. One only observes with an aesthetic passion those landscapes one has seen before in one’s dreams” (Bachelard 1942: 6).¹² *Roman Script* appears as a poem in which writing becomes the very subject of poetry, ‘a script’ reproducing by successive touches a multiple and infinite history, endlessly started anew. The words are sufficient unto themselves, on condition that one makes of each of them “the continued abolition of the primary presence” (Bonnefoy 1990: 241).¹³ By revisiting the past, a past in which “of course, everything has been done or thought before in one form or another” (Mahon 2001: 18), the poet creates a space out of time and the world, almost utopian, a virtual creation which becomes an absolute real, for what seduces in that poetic world is its very illusion whose centre cannot be approached. The poet alone is able to recreate it, or rather to create it through the medium of writing even if this medium cannot deliver in exchange anything more than the impalpable thinness of its presence.

Notes

1. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.
2. This concept of ‘counterpoint’ refers to the technique involving the simultaneous soundings of two or more parts or melodies. As in music, one theme is set in accompaniment against the notes, or verses, of a poetic melody.
3. Here one might be tempted to see an allusion to Seamus Heaney’s work, *Door into the Dark*, published in 1969.
4. S.B.Kennedy, ‘Anne Madden: Introduction’, <http://www.anne-madden.com>. [accessed 15/01/06].

5. These are “Grandfather” (15), “A tolerable wisdom” (38), “The mute phenomena” (82) and “After Michelangelo” (267).
6. “Cette forme se prête sans doute mieux au lyrisme et à la méditation étant fermée sur elle-même.” Translation mine, as well as for all subsequent quotations from the French.
7. “un symbole (relation du texte avec un autre texte, rapport logique, homologique), un indice (relation du texte avec un auteur ancien qu’elle met à la place du patron, c’est la figure du donateur au coin du tableau) [...] une icône, au sens d’une entrée privilégiée dans l’énonciation.”
8. “il est plutôt emporté par la réalité d’un temps jusque-là inédit qui sans cesse crédite ces images-là.”
9. “ces errants du réel, ces catégories du possible, ces éléments sans passé ni avenir.”
10. “tisse le réel et l’irréel”.
11. “donner une forme nouvelle au monde qui n’existe que s’il est sans cesse réimaginé.”
12. “Avant d’être un spectacle tout paysage est une expérience onirique. On ne regarde avec une passion esthétique que les paysages qu’on a d’abord vus en rêve.”
13. “l’abolition continuée de la présence première.”

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