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Melancholy in Contemporary Irish Poetry: The 'Metre Generation' and Mahon

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This article explores the influence of Derek Mahon's melancholic poetry on a younger generation of Irish poets. Drawing on Peter Schwenger's *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (2006), it argues that Mahon's influential early poems deliberately provoke melancholy in order to insist upon the subject's alienation from the world. It traces how the poets Justin Quinn and David Wheatley take on and reject aspects of Mahon's influence, with a focus on this melancholy. Quinn rejects Mahon's melancholy and comes to insist emphatically upon connectedness, resulting in his development of a poetics pledged to traditional forms and full rhymes. Wheatley hews fast to early Mahon's insistence on a gap between us and the world, inflecting that gap with a keen consciousness of environmental crisis. His trajectory, in contrast with later Mahon, is towards an embrace of disjunctive modernist techniques as a means of acknowledging our disconnectedness from the world. Attending to the ways in which Quinn and Wheatley work with and against Mahon's influence sheds light on the 'Metre generation' as one whose poetic inheritance enables a sophisticated and exciting use of form as a tool with which to think through the individual's relationship to the world.

In his book *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Peter Schwenger points out that much art, rather than seeking to diagnose or cure melancholy, strives to cultivate it (2006, 14). Such art holds fast to longing. It does so not for therapy or catharsis, but to see the world anew under the aspect of loss. It is apocalyptic: it makes of our everyday distance from the things of the world the means to point towards ultimate matters. 'Melancholy representation,' Schwenger writes, 'does not pretend to give us access' to the world, 'only to awake our longing toward what must always remain inaccessible, in the world and in us. It is this longing that so much art contains – not that toward which we long' (2006, 14). The insight that art might seek to cultivate melancholy, rather than simply represent it or attempt to salve it, is evocative in the context of the generation of Irish poets who follow after Derek Mahon. Mahon's work is shot through with melancholy from the outset, and in the 1990's it profoundly influenced a generation of Irish poets, among them Vona Groarke, Conor O'Callaghan, Caitriona O'Reilly, John Redmond, David Wheatley and Justin Quinn.

For the poets coming after him, Mahon's example united an artful formalism with an almost irresistible sense of belatedness as the millennium approached. In an interview published in 2013, O'Callaghan and Quinn reflect together on the importance of Mahon for their generation:

O'Callaghan: Since you have mentioned him more than once, now would seem like a good moment for us to acknowledge the absolute centrality of Mahon's work and example to our generation. We were all in love with him! Do you agree that his influence, more than any other, created space for our generation?

Quinn: Oh, he was the man. [. . .] I remember reading an interview with him in the early 1990's where he complained that no-one was imitating him, and yet all us epigones were just about to jump out in the two or three years after. I think his type of poem – not Heaney's, not Longley's, not Boland's – is the one we all began to try to write. (O'Callaghan 2013, 48–49)

O'Callaghan's suggestion here is that Mahon's example was enabling for the poets coming after him in a way that other predecessors' examples were not. Mahon 'created space.' One might speculate that this was so because Mahon offered a means to write poetry that was not redemptive or consolatory but disruptive and ironic. His insistence on cosmopolitanism and internationalism – his ritualized rejection of his place of origin – was important, too, for a generation which is today often associated with an aspiration to post-nationalism. Almost all of this generation of poets live, or have lived, away from Ireland and write about their new homes in their poetry. Some of them – Quinn in particular but also, to some extent, Wheatley, who frequently notes how long he has *not* lived in Ireland – reject the category of 'Irish poet,' insisting on their new home or the English language as more relevant contexts for their poetry. Mahon's dissatisfaction and melancholy, his channeling of the poète maudit persona, appealed to these young poets for whom, in the 1990's, Ireland was already diminishing in significance as a context.

The phrase 'Metre generation' is sometimes used as shorthand for this generation, many of whom were connected in various ways with the poetry journal *Metre,* founded and edited by Quinn and Wheatley. The two poets envisaged a platform for the best in Irish poetry and criticism alongside work from the US, the UK, Australia and poetry in translation. Conor O'Callaghan has described the magazine's ten issues as exemplifying a reaction against the 'expressive, quasi-mystical, affirmative free verse' of much Irish poetry published in the 1980's, and pushing instead towards 'greater formal determinism, a more international perspective, empiricism, rationalism and wit.' Many of this generation of poets tend to be associated with a formal conservativism in their early careers, although they progress in radically various directions.[1]

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[1] Fran Brearton writes more broadly about the poetic influences on this generation in her excellent chapter in the *Oxford Handbook to Modern Poetry* (2012). Matthew Campbell's review of *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry, Volume III* in the online journal *Breac* also offers a brief but perceptive overview of this generation.

Mahon's example has been a matter of anxiety for these poets as well as an enabling force, of course. Wheatley writes: 'Among living Irish poets only Muldoon comes close to Mahon, I would suggest, as a source of anxiety of influence: second-hand Heaney or Longley can be a relatively benign or harmless affair, but anything beyond the bare minimum of second-hand Mahon or Muldoon is positively fatal to a poem' (2011). Attending to Mahon's influence on the poets coming after him – and attending to the significant ways in which they worry about, depart from or react against his influence – affords insight into a generation characterized by their interest in formalism but also by their anxiety about form. Making the case for Mahon's influence can provide fresh insight into the landscape of Irish poetry more generally, moving us away from accounts dominated by the influence of Heaney and Longley. In this paper, I attend to the fate of Mahonesque melancholy in the work of Quinn and Wheatley, suggesting where Quinn and Wheatley follow and depart from Mahon's influence. For Quinn, departure involves rejecting Mahon's melancholy wholesale. His poetry comes to insist on connectedness, through its focus on global systems that sweep up the individual and on moments of postmodern sublime, but also through its poetics of full rhyme. In contrast, the melancholic gap between the human and the non-human becomes central to Wheatley's poetry as he turns increasingly to environmental concerns. It becomes 'a zone of artistic possibility' from which the poem can reflect on the natural world's 'fragility and essential alienness' without claiming to have grasped that non-human world (Wheatley 2015, 19).

The melancholy that Schwenger writes about in *The Tears of Things* is not precisely the melancholia of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia.' In Freud's famous work, the unhealthy failure to incorporate a loss prevents the healthy closure of mourning. Freud's melancholia, which has proven so attractive to postcolonial scholars mining the hauntings and repetitions of Irish literature, begins with an unusual loss – a trauma. Schwenger turns his attention to 'a more ordinary dynamic' (2006, 2). He notes that our everyday relationship to the things of the world begins with loss: when we perceive any given object, 'it is simultaneously apprehended and lost' (Schwenger 2006, 2). No object in the world is ever fully grasped by us. And since, in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'we grasp the unity of our body only in that of the thing' – that

is, we can conceive of our body as a singular thing only because we can conceive of the objects of the world as singular things – our physical self is subject to this same process of apprehension and loss (Schwenger 2006, 3). If we perceive in objects a loss, we perceive in the self a loss. 'In Freud's terms, there is a loss in the very evolution of consciousness, which splits in two what was once one and thus evokes a kind of nostalgia for the prior state' (Schwenger 2006, 5). The melancholy that ensues is, in Schwenger's words, 'less grand, more subtle' than Freud's melancholia. It derives not from a defining moment of bereavement, but from 'the subject's alienation from the objects that are the very co-ordinates of the subject's being in the world' (Schwenger 2006, 10). What we yearn for is 'our own prior state of objecthood, and perception can only stress the ways in which this is so' (Schwenger 2006, 5). Much art, Schwenger points out, does not seek to express, diagnose or stop this process but to provoke it.

Such art is not in the grip of melancholia, as a trauma-riven literature might be, but sees melancholy as a worthwhile end. It is not haunted but aspires to haunt. Derek Mahon's early work places itself in this category, evoking and provoking melancholy at every turn. 'Spring in Belfast' asks the reader to consent to and conspire with a poetic voice that insists on its own alienation. The conspiracy it claims to resume with the 'wet/Stone' of Belfast is a conspiracy based in 'sullen silence' and in knowing one's place (Mahon 2011, 15). In three lines of 'Glengormley,' as Adam Hanna has observed, Mahon curates a small collection of objects that telescope a place's whole melancholic history, its 'former industrial glory and its decline', into 'quiet suburbanity':

> Clothes pegs litter the window ledge
> And the long ships lie in clover; washing lines
> Shake out white linen over the chalk thanes. (Mahon 2011, 16; Hanna 2015, 87)

'Spring in Belfast' and 'Glengormley' are, obviously, poems of place. They are specific in their imagery and draw on the melancholy of a specific set of youthful experiences. The alienated voice which yields only 'casual interest' and 'casual pity' is the voice of a

young Mahon, growing up disaffected among 'the kitchen houses/And echoing back streets of *this* desperate city' and becoming an artist by means of that disaffection (Mahon 2011, 15; my italics.) The 'here' of the final line of 'Glengormley' is no other here but there (Mahon 2011, 16). Critics have been justified in reading these poems in the literary context of Northern Irish poetry and the historical context of sectarian strife. But there is also a more generalizable melancholy at work in these poems, the melancholy of the artist as a young person, coming to consciousness of the human condition: alienated from self, world and others.

'September at Great Yarmouth' locates melancholy in the figures and objects of a seaside at summer's close. This poem is striking for its degree of uncanny anthropomorphism. By repeatedly rendering objects as the subjects of their own actions, Mahon creates a sense of the inevitability of time's passing, its being beyond our control: 'Chimneys breathe and beaches empty' and 'ice-cream stiffens in its cone' (Mahon 2011, 18). Words acquire a double meaning, haunted by death, so that when the boatman calls in a pleasure boat – 'Come in, fifteen, your time is up' – the implication is sinister. Written almost entirely in the third person, the poem suddenly rounds on the reader at the end of the third stanza: 'You have sown and reaped; now sow again' (Mahon 2011, 18). By doing so, it draws us in, provokes our melancholy. Time is passing for us, too.

Mahon himself featured in the first issue of *Metre,* for which he translated an extract from Francis Ponge's 'Pine-Wood Notebook' (Ponge 1996). Ponge's 'notebook' presents itself as a set of diary entries in which the poem's speaker (or, more accurately, annotator) makes renewed attempts each day to describe a pine forest:

> *Aug. 8th*
> Stripped (to half-way up) of their branches, as also by their exclusive concern
> for the green tip (the green cone at the top) and by their serious gloom in
> the mass. . .
> [. . .]
> *Aug. 9th*
> Of senile aspect, white like the beards of old negroes.

Ponge's poetry evokes the gap between the human and the non-human by perform-ing the inevitable failure of any attempt to render an object in all its particulars. Our melancholy failure to reach the world is the failure of language, our imperfect tool for bridging the divide between us and world. In Ponge's poems, the particulars of the object in question 'are demonstrated to be also those of words' (Schwenger 2006, 27). The 'fairly orderly profusion of senile trunks' in Mahon's translation are also the lined-up letters of the prose poem in front of us; the poem comments ironically on its own 'wholesome atmosphere' and 'vibrant but soft and agreeable musical-ity.' By falling through the forest and ending up back at words, the poem's attempt to describe something in the world fails theatrically. Ponge's project of repeatedly describing and yet failing to describe objects insists upon the impossibility of our ever fully grasping objects through language.

In début collections by Wheatley and Quinn, objects are made strange by our encountering them at an unfamiliar time or in an unfamiliar place. These early poems by Wheatley and Quinn have no interest in consoling us. They go in search of melancholy. Wheatley's 'Sleepwalking' describes a late-night encounter with a kitchen made menacing by night:

> but this was hardly the kitchen
> of the evening before, the unusual shape
> in the corner that was a brush then
> could hardly be the brush that we used
> for sweeping the tiles, and the goldfish
> rubbing its nose on the glass of the bowl,
> were I to hazard a finger, could
> hardly but have developed a taste
> for flesh. . . (Wheatley 1997, 13)

The possibilities strung together by the poem's repeated expression of disbelief – 'could hardly be,' 'could hardly but' – gain a gentle panic and a gentle humour as the poem sweeps its eye over the kitchen, taking stock of ordinary household items and

a goldfish apparently turned cartoon piranha. But this panic is recalled in tranquility, and to the poem's speaker, it is desirable. 'Sleepwalking' opens with the declaration 'I want to feel it again: what I felt/when I woke once standing in the kitchen' (Wheatley 1997, 13). As the poem departs the strange scene, its speaker looks back with longing:

> . . . looked back
> once to see it again: the kitchen
> like a charcoal drawing, the table
> set for my absence, this new place
> I had seen for the first time
> stripping of meaning the place that I knew
> without a word or a struggle, threatening
> only that it might become habitable.

The suggestion is that this space of dislocation, which 'might' become 'habitable,' will be the space Wheatley's art seeks out. As Maria Johnston writes, 'this poem as an initiatory poetic statement may be seen to assert the poet's own resolve to take nothing for granted in his poetry, not even the perceptible layer of reality that appears before his eyes' (2008). A strange world will be hunted out within the familiar one: the poet pledges himself to melancholy.

Written in the second person, Quinn's 'High and Dry' follows its addressee on an early morning drive. The emptied-out city puts its narrator in mind of a time outside time: 'At this hour Dublin city has a calm/which I imagine follows armageddon' (Quinn 1995, 21). Quinn's poem ends on a melancholy provoked by encountering traffic lights deprived of their function: 'Strangest of all/Are traffic lights, high and dry at crossings, /Clicking through their signals, and no-one there.' Like Wheatley's sleepwalking poem, Quinn's poem seeks out strangeness. Sometimes these early poems by Wheatley and Quinn are apocalyptic – the street before the day begins suggests a world after Armageddon; the night-time table is set for the speaker's 'absence'; a rock perches on an apartment that is long since obliterated – because in order to open 'new vistas beyond meaning's authoritative last word,' a melancholy

representation will often view 'the world under the aspect of 'last things' and so [see] it for the first time, as a dying person might be born into new perceptions' (Schwenger 2006, 14). A writer might seek out or provoke melancholy in order to see more clearly.

Schwenger remarks on the 'wistfulness' we have towards objects 'when "being in the world" becomes a burden': there are moments when we might feel nostalgia for objecthood (2006, 77). A process of imagining the self as an object works itself out over the course of Quinn's second collection, *Privacy* (1999). The collection culminates in a final short poem in which the speaker imagines himself a 'rock' perched on an apartment building that no longer exists (Quinn 1999, 63). Much of *Privacy* is centred on the poet's apartment block in the suburbs of Prague. The apartment building, apartment and furniture are all made strange in a variety of ways in the course of the book. 'Háje' places the apartment in a no-man's-land between the urban and the wilderness: 'A Marlboro billboard reminds me about nature' (Quinn 1999, 13). In 'Apartment', a reader whose book 'maybe binds/ Huge things together, has everything arranged // From nations to the Derridean trace' is interrupted in his reading by the glimpse of a neighbour at a neighboring window. The attempt to grasp a world intellectually is thrown into disarray by a glance exchanged with another, a doubling which simultaneously suggests the possibility of knowing – the neighbor and the narrator appear as familiar to one another as twins – and its impossibility: a 'moment of mirage and truth' (Quinn 1999, 15).

Quinn identifies in Mahon's example 'a notional school of poetics' which he suggests he and O'Callaghan both attended, which 'taught [them] to hide [their] louche rhymes in complex stanzas with a natural speaking voice' (O'Callaghan 2013, 46). He goes on to roundly forswear that notional school. Quinn contests two key aspects of Mahon's example in particular. One is Mahon's melancholy; the other – not, as we shall see, unrelated – is Mahon's frequent hiding of rhyme in half-rhyme. To some small degree, Quinn's forswearing of Mahon depends on a mischaracterization of Mahon. The older poet, after all, has often written in full rhyme throughout his career. Sometimes it is even possible to suspect Quinn of

taking his cue directly from Mahon's fully-rhymed poems. In one early poem, 'First Love,' Mahon uses rhyme to weave a marriage document for himself and his lover in which the poem itself performs the union, albeit with an undertone of misgiving:

> This is a circling of itself and you –
> A form of words, compact and compromise,
> Prepared in the false dawn of the half-true
> Beyond which the shapes of truth materialize. (2011, 20)

Quinn works a similar weaving in his poem 'A Strand of Hair,' in which 'this' points not only to the strand of hair but to the looping, slender form of the poem itself:

> I never asked you for your hand,
> Or in some man-to-man talk asked your father.
> So light will be our wedding-band.
>
> The other day I found an errant strand
> Of your dark hair and held it, like a tether,
> And though I never asked you for your hand,
>
> We will be married, and
> As this, hardly to be felt, twines round my finger,
> So light will be our wedding-band. (1999, 12)

Where Mahon writes of 'wind whistling off pale stars' and a 'ghostly echo from the clamorous dead,' Quinn has the sun's rays winding 'gold heat about us.' But if Quinn's wedding lyric lets in none of the dark melancholy of Mahon's, the point nonetheless stands. Quinn's own comments about Mahon bequeathing, above all, cunningly hidden 'louche rhymes' to a generation can be taken with a pinch of salt. What they offer is an insight into Quinn's own sense of Mahon's significance and the degree to which Quinn thinks of himself as reacting against Mahon when he moves into full rhyme and insists, in his poetry, on abandoning melancholy for a sense of connectedness.

Quinn describes Mahon's melancholy (in terms of 'irony,' 'pathos,' 'lament' and 'sadness') as a 'blind alley':

So much of what he writes, even at his best, is lament – for the lost peoples, for some pre-modern age. It was difficult to talk about anything in that Mahon poem without being ironically *sad* that one was living now, and not some other time. I kept running up against this in the late 90's in the poems I was writing – as I'd get to the end of them they would start pushing me towards this ironic, sophisticated, punning sadness, no matter how much I kicked and struggled. (O'Callaghan 2013, 49)

Quinn's third collection, *Fuselage,* pushes against Mahon's 'irony and pathos.' It opens with a sense of belatedness that strongly recalls Mahon. Its first section speaks of 'evening light'; it is 'now getting late'; '[s]ummer weather' is a bonus (Quinn, 2000, 13). Even the 'joy' of spring is nostalgia. However, as *Fuselage* proceeds, it moves instead to an insistence that the postmodern, globalized age can be glorious. In the course of the book, we ascend into the sky in an airplane, look down on the whole world using Google Maps, and climb to a vantage point over tourist hordes in a spectacular London.

In stark contrast with Mahon's preoccupation with our distance from the things of the world, Quinn in *Fuselage* emphatically insists on the wholeness of everything. The 'fuselage' of the collection's title becomes an image for the world, which exists as it does only because of the mass of consciousness which is humanity:

. . .The world
is spinning fuselage
& swerves & bends & swoops
in answer to our will

though we don't see or know
each other, what spirit
each is of. (Quinn 2002, 28–29)

In another poem a remote control which, in Mahon's hands, might have been rendered strange and unknowable, wires its holder into 'the systems, the waves' of the human world. In *Fuselage*, we are knitted into systems by our clothes, our buildings, 'the tiny fibres // furiously knitting me into the flows, the circuits, the systems' (Quinn 2002, 40). In a supermarket the speaker imagines his own hands as an airborne attack, since he is connected to geopolitical violence as to everything else:

> that at any moment your own hands
>
> would swoop down from the skies
> with exceptionally intricate weaponry destroying
>
> foliage, cats, schoolchildren, you also. . . (Quinn 2002)

Objects for Quinn are really portals to systems; his poems are impatient with a gaze that would rest on an object and wallow in the melancholy of things, instead of looking to what is beyond the object. Although *Fuselage* is the key text in which this impatience is worked out, it is true of Quinn's body of work as a whole. Even when, in *Privacy,* he is detailing household items in a manner reminiscent of Ponge, his attention shifts to the electricity running through them – just one of the many forces that knits together things and us – and to the nuclear reactor with its 'ten transformer stations' that makes this connection possible (Quinn 1999, 20).

As I've suggested elsewhere, Quinn's embrace of traditional forms and full rhyme is part of this embrace of connectedness.[2] Rejecting 'sweet ironies that ultimately fly under the reader's radar,' Quinn has moved towards an insistence on full rhyme that is startling in the context of contemporary Irish poetry (O'Callaghan 2013, 46). Earlier poems play more quizzically with form. In 'Non-Enclave' the rhymes are hidden because they come at the line-beginnings instead of -endings, in a poem that is tethered to the right side of the page instead of the left (Quinn 1999, 59). In 'Weekend

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[2] I have previously touched on Quinn's use of rhyme to submit to sociality in (2016) 'What Next?: Review of *Early House* by Justin Quinn.' *Dublin Review of Books.* Available online at http://www.drb.ie/essays/what-next-.

Away' the seven-line stanzas are rhymed with each other – abcdefg – in a way that is fun to notice, but has little effect on the music of the poem (Quinn 1999, 38). Quinn comes to see full rhyme as 'an older practice,' however, and a more desirable one (O'Callaghan 2013, 46). In interview he declares that he increasingly believes that poetry should revert, making itself available to the untrained ear (O'Callaghan 2013, 47). In a poem from his most recent collection, Quinn's speaker holds his six-year-old son close and notices the bones, the coursing blood within. 'It's like some awful joke,' he tells us:

> I might as well say
> a sack of sticks
> has taken all my love.
> His bones, in time and times,
> like mine will fall apart.
> OK. First job to do
> tomorrow: go through
> the ancient rhymes
> for words like love and heart. (Quinn 2015, 32)

This poem imagines a store of rhymes available in the English language, to which we can turn at intense moments. It is because the rhymes are 'ancient' that they are worth turning to. Quinn has long tended to be dismissive of the notion that the poet should seek an 'original' individual voice, preferring to pursue strategies that open up his poems to connectedness with others. Such an approach imagines poetic thinking to be a collective enterprise.[3] In his earliest collections Quinn frequently writes in the second person, inviting the reader to temporarily inhabit his point of view. As his career progresses, he turns to full rhyme as a means to submit

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[3] Quinn has spoken about his attitude towards the seeking of an original poetic voice in interview with me, saying: 'This idea of blending into the tradition seemed much more attractive than trying to do something "original." That notion of originality has become, for me, very tawdry, dog-eared' (unpublished interview, Dublin, Summer 2013).

to sociality, to insist that the poem knows more than the poet because its rhymes tap into and echo a collective knowledge contained in the language. As Simon Jarvis puts it,

> [T]he great rimaria . . . hold the formula out to us, admit to it as though admitting that thinking is never all our own work or a matter of finding that impossible quiddity, the distinctive personal voice, but that it is, rather, the question how we shall in the right way lose our voices into those of the dead and of the unborn. (2011, 20)

Rhyme, in this conception of it, imagines that the language connects us to each other when we choose the word rhyme suggests. Quinn's formal embrace of this sense of connectedness, which in some of his poems is roundly joyful, though in others beset with anxiety, is in part a reaction against the sense of melancholy in Mahon, despite Mahon's own use of rhyme.

What Wheatley takes from Mahon, at least at first, is an eye for débris. An early poem, 'In Glencullen,' evokes melancholy through a series of objects found in the mountainous countryside near Dublin: broken mirrors, golf balls, 'wool on a barbed-wire fence' (1997, 42):

> Beer-can piled on beer-can
> by the fairy fort: a god is born.

The reader can hardly help but think of Mahon's famous translation of Nerval's 'The Mute Phenomena' (Mahon 2011, 76). In that poem we find Mahon declaring:

> God is alive and lives under a stone;
> Already in a lost hubcap is conceived
> The ideal society which will replace our own.

'Along a Cliff', in Wheatley's first collection, *Thirst,* is attentive to the debris encountered on a cliff walk: golf tees, 'worms of pipes and tubing,' a ruined castle (Wheatley 1997, 60). Human history and myth are themselves reduced to debris:

> On the far side of the castle are steps
> cut into the rock that if you count them
> make twelve going down, but, it's said,
> thirteen when you come up, the extra step
> like a piece of mythical flotsam
> from a sea that has cast up Vikings,
> St Patrick, almost the French, in its time.

We think of the chorus of debris thrown up by the sea in Mahon's 'Beyond Howth Head' – 'Unbosomings of seaweed, wrack/industrial bile, a boot from Blackpool, / contraceptive deftly tied/with best regards from Merseyside' – and in 'The Apotheosis of Tins': 'we wake among the shoelaces and the white wood/to a raw wind and the cries of gulls' (Mahon 2011, 52; 2009, 69). In Mahon's latter poem, trash is 'promoted' to 'artefacts' fit for a museum, simply by surviving the ravages of time. 'Bray Head' is attentive, too, to the ways in which a change in perspective can make familiar things strange. As it rounds to a close, the landscape looms almost too large for the eye and the walkers struggle to contain it, seeking a detail that will return the landscape to comprehension in human terms. Unlike in Mahon's 'Howth Head,' the poem never swoops out beyond the scene to some greater wisdom. It remains hampered by what the poet can attest to seeing, what is unquestionably before him.

Hugh Haughton has focused in an article on Mahon's 'devotion to rubbish,' seeing in it a 'secular *memento mori* of the empire of the transient that is consumer culture' (Haughton 2002, 324). Reading 'A Garage of Co. Cork,' Haughton hones in on Mahon's meditation on the 'process of aesthetic revaluation' (Haughton 326). In the course of this process, an object moves between something functional, something aspirational – the 'retail catalogues' in Mahon's poem – and rubbish, the latter a 'sacramental' transformation because it is the closest the object comes to 'the materials that gave rise to [it]' (Mahon 2011, 122). But in Mahon's poem there is also a melancholy around all that cannot be grasped. (The same melancholy is found in the poem's predecessor, 'Filling Station' by Elizabeth Bishop.) 'A Garage' meditates on everything it does not know: the garage building might contain the ghosts of

a family, or it might 'have nothing behind it but thin air' (Mahon 2011, 121). The family might have gone to South Boston or Cricklewood, or they might be still here, transformed into abandoned petrol pumps. 'Surely a whitewashed suntrap at the back / gave way to hens' begins one stanza, recalling the buttery lambency of a back-yard in a poem by Heaney, but simultaneously casting doubt on its possibility with that 'surely' (Mahon 2011, 121). In a poem packed full of rubbish, each object upon which the eye falls offers the same melancholic conclusion: there only *might* have been something; either way, something is lost. Haughton ends his survey of Mahon's garbage with a quote from Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory,* which remarks of rubbish that 'we only notice it when it is in the wrong place. Something which has been discarded, but never threatens to intrude, does not worry us at all' (Thompson 1979; Haughton 2002, 92). With this quote, Haughton glances towards the fact that what characterizes rubbish 'when it is in the wrong place' is the same thing that characterizes a tool that ceases working: we *notice* it, and in that moment of noticing we perceive our everyday loss.

For Schwenger, who also draws on *Rubbish Theory,* provoking this 'noticing' is part of art's arsenal. In his analysis, Schwenger makes a distinction between 'object' and 'thing' which is helpful here. It is human language, he notes, which makes a thing an object: once named and recreated in language, a thing becomes the object of a subject. It is 'assimilated into the terms of the human subject at the same time that it is opposed to it as object – an opposition that is necessary for the subject's separation and definition' (Schwenger 22). This process of the objectification of things through language is never complete, however. 'The *x* that is the thing shadows the object as it is represented to our knowledge. In a paradoxical way, beyond our knowledge we always know something more, namely, that there is an unknowable otherness of the thing' (Schwenger 23). It is when we notice the 'unknowable other-ness' of the thing that we are prone to Schwenger's everyday melancholy. Rubbish is useful to art that seeks to provoke such melancholy because it already inhabits a limi-nal space, in human perception, between the useful, the useless and – reclaimed as a collectible – the valuable (Schwenger 152). Its undecided status gives it the potential to make us notice all that is ungraspable about it.

Wheatley, like Mahon, is devoted to debris. His second collection, *Misery Hill,* builds a whole Dublin of rubbish. The pages are littered with discarded objects: 'a pram, a tyre, a handbag,' 'glass, graffiti, vomit, faeces,' a 'burger box, and a burger too, a chipbox/and a milkshake bobbing in the fountain,' the condoms rendered rubbish by love-making: 'our latex jellyfish/discarded after the act' (Wheatley 2000, 9, 10, 12, 23, 55). In among the clutter are objects indifferent to us or worse: bicycles to trip over, electricity meters demanding change, victorious rubble, god-like cranes. A title poem makes human history as disposable as prams, tyres and handbags:

> only the allure of a name
> still on the map but nowhere else.
>
> A name on a map but even at that
> more solid than so many other ghosts
> I have stalked in our snap-together capital
> of forgetfulness – Blind Alley,
> Smock Alley, Hangman's Lane,
>
> Isolde's Tower. Names fade,
> people forget. I pick through the debris:
> a pram, a tyre, a handbag.

I write 'disposable'; and yet, in Wheatley's Dublin, debris is not so much ephemeral as 'constant – an enduring parallel universe of matter indifferent to human existence' (Schwenger 81). It brings constantly to our notice the 'unknowable otherness' of things.

For all that Wheatley's poetry is fascinated by the debris that litters his world, his poetry is equally worried about the difficulty of ever truly *seeing* – or by extension, representing in language – these non-human things. This anxiety is evident in Wheatley's use of sestinas in his first collection, *Thirst.* In 'Bray Head,' the poem's speaker protests too much:

> The one thing the fog over the mountain
> lifts on this morning disturbing the scene
>
> is me, tracing a line over the mountain
> between the plain and twitching sea,
> the sound of my footsteps troubling the air
> as little as my figure alters the scene. (Wheatley 1997, 14)

The speaker's modest claims here are belied by the sestina form. If 'Bray Head' pretends to be about how little the subject affects a scene, it is at least as much about drawing attention to the the voice that actually produces and arranges the scene entire. Maria Johnston writes of 'Bray Head':

> The sestina form is appropriate here, its obsessive repetitions creating a stranglehold that is claustrophobic, creating a growing sense of entrapment and unease as the self finds itself estranged from the natural world. However, the reader is too aware from the beginning that the form is imposed on the words and the sestina is thereby too strenuous and heavy-handed. (2008)

Johnston is correct to note the poem's growing sense of entrapment and estrangement, but mistaken to separate this sense from the form which creates it. As Stephen Burt argues, the sestina is an overtly artificial form and contemporary poets often choose it for this reason:

> Unlike the two-part, thesis-anti-thesis structure of the sonnet, for example, or the *aab* structure of blues, the six-words seven-times structure of the sestina corresponds to no prominent process in human conversation or in the logic of discursive prose. The less a strict form can be made to look natural, the less it looks like an inevitable consequence of a poem's apparent content, the more it looks like a conscious choice – or a game. (2007, 222)

In other words, the point of a sestina might be precisely to be 'strenuous and heavy-handed.' By this means, it can draw our attention to the fact that we impose form on

words *and* world: all of it a game of language, none of it 'natural.' Wheatley's sestina uses surprising, whimsical vocabulary to describe Bray Head – 'pubic gorse,' 'a ferry scabs the sea,' 'a summit beacon brands the air' – as a constant reminder of the fact that these are ways of seeing the landscape which only a human mind could produce. Far from being a poem which, as Fran Brearton has it, 'captures, through the repetitions, a certain tranquility,' this is an anxious poem which dithers over our ever getting beyond ourselves and grasping the non-human (2012, 632).

This anxiety is not absent from Mahon's poetry by any means. But as the careers of Mahon and Wheatley progress, they diverge particularly in their approach to eco-poetics. The crux of this divergence is that Wheatley hews fast to the insistence on the gap between us and the world beyond us – an insistence which affects his poetry formally in interesting ways – whereas Mahon, in his eco-poetry, arguably breaks faith with that unfortunate but necessary gap between the human and the non-human. Wheatley stays focused on the melancholy that arises out of our recognition that we are trapped by our forms and by our perception of the world – divided from the real world of objects. He creates out of that melancholy.

The investigation in Wheatley's poetry of the gap between the human and the non-human is linked to environmental concerns. His critical work on *Contemporary British Poetry* devotes a chapter to the problem posed to contemporary poets who want to write about nature by their writing in an age of environmental catastrophe. Conceding the inescapability of an anthropocentric perspective in any act of writing by a human, he nonetheless rejects the option of 'giv[ing] up on the non-human altogether. As a piece of pragmatism this would seem petty and unimaginative' (Wheatly 2015, 138). He proposes instead that the poet might 'see the gap between the human and non-human as a zone of artistic possibility, in which concern for nature expresses itself through meditations on its fragility and essential alienness' (138). Within this melancholic zone he places the more successful poets in his chapter. This zone of melancholy is also a productive space in which to place Wheatley's own poetry. It is through his consideration of the insurmountable gap between the human and the non-human, which is increasingly central to his poetry over time, that Wheatley has produced some of his most exciting work.

'Bankside-Wilcolmlee by Instamatic' constructs itself out of a series of very short prose poems, several-sentence responses to 'point-and-shoot' photographs taken by a roving eye (Wheatley 2006, 15). The series begins with an unanswered question – 'Do they all lift, all these bridges, even this far up the river?' – which sets an unstudied tone and positions the poem's perspective as that of the photograph: on the ground, in the moment, and sharing with us only the surfaces of things. (In another poem, we might have expected the poet to do the work of finding out whether they all lift, all these bridges.) Visual information is presented as containing clues to the truth of the world, but these clues never resolve into a solution. 'A bicycle against a wall that would seem to suggest habitation' may or may not suggest habitation. A chimney seen from several different angles suggests different truths at different moments: 'The tipped cigar of the chimney shifts from side to side of the river, depending how far along the road you are.' To the poet's/walker's/photographer's putative enquiry after the truth, all the chimney definitely has to offer is the 'Up-yours' of a raised middle finger. 'Bankside-Wilcolmlee by Instamatic' demonstrates one possible mode for building a poem out of not-knowing. It inhabits delicately, and with humour and humility, the melancholic gap between the human eye and the non-human world.

In the final chapter of Schwenger's work on melancholy, he discusses the corpse as the 'most melancholy incarnation' of debris, because the corpse, which is an object, also 'bears the imprint of a residual subjectivity' (2006, 157). In literature this can be doubly so, because the corpse can be made to speak. Wheatley explores this possibility not only in poems where literal corpses speak, but also in poems where the animals he anthropomorphizes are of a species so sluggish that they blur the difference between living things and 'mute phenomena.' What would it be like to be axolotl, who 'hang/in the water, borne along on the tank's absent ripples, passing each other like/waterborne toys, dangling mobiles' (2006, 28)? Or the sloth, who, in 'static alliance with the coelacanth/and giant tortoise' has 'rendered extinction redundant' (2006, 30)? 'Sloth' speaks back to the idea that sloths fall out of trees because they mistake their limbs for tree branches. The poem gives a philosophical spin to the sloth's mysterious behavior with a question around solipsism and self-sufficiency:

> Arm still raised, he has
> a question he has long, long since forgotten
> *If I raise my arm to grip the branch which is*
> *my arm, release my arm to grip the same arm,*
> *what am I lacking to hold myself up? Am I*
> >   *not there*
> > >   *to catch myself*
> > > >   *as I fall?*

The sloth's assertion of self-sufficiency – 'Am I/not there. . .?' – is piteous and cannot be taken at face value. It points up our own dependency on a world we cannot grasp.

In 'St Brenhilda on Sula Sgeir', St Brenhilda lives among the birds and is unsentimental about them (Wheatley 2010, 76). Her light is 'a cormorant lamp, /its Pentecostal tongue // its own wick.' Instead of presuming to impose her concepts on the things of the world – 'Shall I preach to the birds?' – she recognizes that there is nothing she can give them that they do not already have. When she dies, in becoming rubbish, she becomes a home for the birds:

> I go down
> easy into the earth, rise
> again to the wispy tuft
> of a shag's nest under
>
> my picked-clean ribs.

This poem is suffused with the melancholy of a life that is lived as close to nature as possible, yet reaches no deeper understanding of birds, seals or stone. In the 'oily glare' of the cormorant lamp, 'nothing is illuminated' (76). Yet the saint's fate, finally becoming an object, is portrayed as a just reward for an exemplary life. A melancholic space of closeness with nature, where one questions without expectation of an answer, is taken by the poem to be admirable – even sacred.

As Mahon's poetry becomes environmentally aware, he is less comfortable in the celebration of rubbish and more inclined to rail against it. For later Mahon, 'rubbish is pure negative' (Haughton 2002, 337). In lines like the following, the complexity of Mahon's previous engagement with debris is lost: 'Elocution, logic, political science, /Antibiotics, do-it-yourself, /And a plover flops in his oil slick.' For Wheatley, who has more than once expressed his frustration at this 'Mahon the eco-poet,' retaining that complexity is crucial to our keeping faith with the unbridgeable gap between the human and the non-human. [4] In Wheatley's critical work on Mahon, he evinces frustration at Mahon's formal trajectory since the 1990's as much as at his thematic one. He writes:

> Derek Mahon has dabbled in concrete poetry down the years, but in poems he has uniformly chosen not to collect and reprint. In his translations of Philippe Jaccottet, he has complained of the unreadable French poetry, '*poésie illisible,*' that would displace the lyric disciplines of the Swiss writer, suggesting any Mahonesque interest in Mallarmé would stop short of *Un Coup de Dés.* The fault-line between Mahon's modernist temperament and his cleaving to lyric forms above all else has been one of the most influential arguments with oneself in Irish writing ever since Mahon's début in 1968. (Wheatley 2013a)

Wheatley's frustration with Mahon's eco-poetics and Mahon's drawing back from modernist forms is part of what leads the younger poet to turn to Ian Hamilton Finlay. The strand of exploration in Wheatley that concerns itself with the gap between the human and the non-human comes to spectacular fruition in a kind of collaboration with (the late) Finlay, who, for Wheatley, is everything that later Mahon is not.

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[4] Wheatley writes in a review of Mahon's New Collected Poems (2011): '[O]ften in recent poems there is a feeling that consolation and community, worthy and desirable things both, have been willed into place, "by just saying it," as much as demonstrated or proved. [. . .] With Mahon it is not the natural world that is at issue so much as the pose of concern the work is concerned to strike on its behalf.'

Wheatley responds to Finlay's work in his surprising and hilarious pamphlet *The Reed Bunting Unseen: A Camouflage Garden for Ian Hamilton Finlay.* For Wheatley, Finlay is one writer whose work 'overcomes the anxieties of its relationship to nature by, in many cases, becoming a physical part of it' (2015, 151). Through *Little Sparta*, a poetry garden, Finlay's work inhabits nature as fully as possible and paradoxically points up the insurmountable distance between itself and the natural world. At once a work of poetry and of criticism, elucidating and commenting on *Little Sparta,* Wheatley's *Garden* is best read as if it, too, were a garden. One wanders through it and spots new things each time; the poems are physical presences on its landscape. At least one poem cannot be seen from one place, but only by moving through the whole space of the text: the word FERRY, mimicking a slowly-moving ferry seen at different moments, can be spotted in parts at different points in the text. 'Sconser Trilogy' works like a comic strip of three frames, in which a gate post is represented by the word 'gate-post' and a briefly appearing buzzard by the word 'buzzard.' The final poem is a map of the horizon.

The Reed Bunting Unseen makes great play of the gap between the human and the non-human, taking its wildly inventive cues from Finlay. Finlay, Wheatley writes,

> [takes] Pound's insistence that the natural object is always the adequate sym-
> bol to an impossible extreme. Frequently, the title of [his] short poems will
> be longer than the poem itself, but even so there will be space for the two
> to interact in a way that lifts the natural world into the realm of the *makar*
> (in the antique Scottish word for poet) and of artistic creation. (2015, 152)

Wheatley's own pamphlet is full of moments where the natural world is imagined as a *makar,* a creator of the 'silent poetry' Finlay proposed concrete poetry to be*.* The sun erases morning dew, pebbles are chattered to sand, a bird denies our access to the name of the bird and the stone placed in a lochan makes an island. Herring gulls paint the ground with their excrement in the manner of Jackson Pollock. These acts of art are often jokingly imagined as proprietorial or aggressive in the manner of Finlay's own art. (As Wheatley tells us, Finlay thought of his garden as an 'attack' rather

than a 'retreat.') They suggest the sense in which we might productively attempt to know the non-human without attempting to grasp it: by attending to its silent poetry, we might creatively inhabit the gap between us and it.

One question raised by Wheatley's textual garden is this: If we stayed in the melancholic space between ourselves and the non-human, long enough and attentively enough, might we not garner, like spies, something from the other side? We already know the answer must be 'no.' A melancholy that enabled such progress would have achieved mourning. And yet, because we keep yearning for the answer to be 'yes,' the answer must be 'no' again and again, without end. The melancholy we experience, faced with such an abyss, can paradoxically be a positive force for art. In contrast with the 'terminus of mourning, that healthy adjustment to reality,' Schwenger writes, 'melancholy prolongs itself: it is a desire, a yearning that refuses to conclude' (175). It is because we can never grasp the pebble that we must keep describing it.

The 'Metre' generation is one whose poetic inheritance enables a sophisticated and exciting use of form as a tool with which to think. A significant aspect of this inheritance is the early and intense encounter of this generation with Mahon's formally gorgeous and melancholic work. Attending to the ways in which Wheatley and Quinn work with and against Mahon's influence sheds light on the different trajectories of their own bodies of poetry, including the fascinatingly different formal routes they have taken. Quinn peels off into a poetry that seeks to reveal the individual's sense of alienation and melancholy as specious, disguising a connectedness with the world to which we must attend if we are to live authentically and well. Wheatley finds that only in acknowledging the gap between us and the world can we adequately respect that world's 'fragility and essential alienness' (2015, 138). Evidently, these poetries exist in a kind of opposition to one another. Yet a reader encountering them at this moment of unprecedented global connectedness, in a world poised at the brink of environmental catastrophe, might be persuaded of the truth and necessity of both.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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