
An Ironist's "Final Vocabulary": Derek Mahon's Re-Visions

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Abstract: Critics tend to cast a suspicious eye on Derek Mahon's seemingly obsessive revisions of his works. Though it needs to be acknowledged that Mahon's habitual practice of revision does not always lead to a definite improvement of the poems' quality, this article argues that the poet revises to destabilize a formation of what Richard Rorty calls "final vocabulary" as a never quitting ironist. Mahon's constant undercutting of his stable textual ground stems from a deeper Mahonian poetics which has at its core the urge to work against fixed perspective and settled interpretation in unsettling political and cultural circumstances that produce intolerance and claustrophobia. Mahon also presents a Beckettian resistance of the limitedness of poetic language by pluralizing poetic ambivalence and indeterminacy.

Keywords: modern Irish poetry, Derek Mahon, revision, poetic instability

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In *Lives of the Poets*, Michael Schmidt writes that Mahon's poetry has been "consistently undervalued for fifty years" (50). The poet, reaching an artistic achievement comparable with his renowned peer Seamus Heaney, has contributed to modern Irish poetry with a characteristic "metaphysical unease" (Mahon, *Lives* 12), a fierce attentiveness to the non-human world, and an elegantly sharp poetic voice. Mahon has long been acknowledged as a poet of irony with ambivalent and oscillating stances. While the poet's thematic concerns—home and exile, barbarism and modern civilization, poetic privacy and community—are consistent, his vision is never fixed. Playing with equivocal and contradictory points of view, the poet presents his works in an unsettling way: swinging between construction and decomposition, involvement and detachment, one version of the poem and another. Linda Hutcheon writes, "the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is impossible to fix his or her text convincingly" (16). In Mahon's case, the difficulty of fixing his text convincingly does not merely stem from the non-decisive and resilient irony with which the poet carefully laces his poems. The more vexing problem is that there does not even exist a "stable" text due to the poet's obsessive revision of his body of work. Numerous major or minor revisions in *Poems 1962-1978*, *Collected Poems*, *Selected Poems*, and *New Collected Poems* prove Mahon's passion for reworking his poetry. The poet has deleted and added stanzas, changed titles

and dedications, altered line breaks and punctuations, which occasionally incur confusion and could be troublesome for some critics. Michael Allen admits that “there tends to be emendation which we could almost call cosmetic and which need little attention” (98). Paul Muldoon directly points out that “I don’t think a writer has any right to go back and fiddle about it. If he feels the thing doesn’t work, then skip it, throw it out, try to forget about it” (82). However, it is worth noticing that the poet’s attentiveness to revision makes his “fiddling about it” and his “cosmetic emendation” more than a corrective process and it asks for a closer examination.

Mahon’s constant undercutting of his works destabilizes his “final vocabulary,” a term used by Richard Rorty to describe a set of words “which people employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (73). Rorty further points out that, unlike people who are “still attached to common sense,” ironists can never come to terms with the idea of “final vocabulary” and are “always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (74). In this sense, Mahon is close to the ironists defined by Rorty, since they perceive language not as a stable construction upon which further conversation could be built, but rather as a flowing force subject to contingency. Similarly, Mahon’s habitual practice of revision, deliberately creating and then obliterating the words and lines, achieves a poetic instability through the obsessive repetition of itself. What Mahon’s revisions point toward is not the remaking of the poems, but the dissolution of the poet’s previous poetic creation. Though Yeats is also a poet who noticeably makes revisions of his works, there are temperamental differences between Mahon’s and Yeats’s practice. Yeats defended his revisions:

The friends that have it I do wrong
Whenever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

(Collected Works viii)

Yeats’s practice of revision indicates a form of remaking and renewal, which “will follow unwinding” and reshape the poems (McGuinness 132). And during the process both the poet himself and the poems are reconstructed. Yeats also wrote, “I have noticed some things about my poetry that I did not know before, in this process of correction . . . that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity” (*Letters* 63). The poet’s “cry of the heart” is unveiled and then explored in the “process of correction,” which for Yeats is a way to set right his old self and poems and to infuse them with a new understanding and definition. As Lady Gregory comments, Yeats “practises what he preaches; is working over those old poems as if for a competition for eternity” (Robinson 263). If, for Yeats, the eternity is achieved through the remaking of the self and the poems, then for Mahon, it could only be realized in the process of change and destabilization. The poet writes in “Heraclitus on Rivers”:

Nobody steps into the same river twice.
The same river is never the same

Because that is the nature of water.
 Similarly your changing metabolism
 Means that you are no longer you.

(Mahon, *New Collected Poems* 105)

Mahon's "Heraclitus on Rivers" can be seen as the poet's defense of his revisions: the habitual practice becomes the poet's "changing metabolism," a natural process of dissolution and destabilization to maintain the life of the poetry. For Mahon as it is for Heraclitus, the only constant in life is change. While Yeats succeeds in creating a renewed self through the revisions, Mahon focuses on the idea of "no longer," the nature of the flowing water. The point is not about reconstruction or remaking, but ironically, about the constantly dissolving force that counters a stable construction. Critics who attempt to pattern Mahon's revisions may first need to take a pause and consider whether Mahon's revisions and his right to "fiddle about it" (Muldoon 82) point to substantial alteration, or merely the act of changing. For example, Michael Allen argues that the movement from the poetry that deals in "linguistic density, irony, ambiguity, paradox ('negative capacity' at a premium)" to the one that deals in "clarity, resonance, strength of utterance (bardic authority at a premium)" seems "to govern Mahon's revisions" (102). However, it should be noticed that Allen's observation does not apply to all of Mahon's revision, and it is risky to use the word "govern" to imply an overarching pattern in Mahon's revisions. The attempts to categorize Mahon's revisions would to some extent miss the flowing and unfixing nature of the emendations. As T. S. Eliot writes in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, "indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his original meaning—or without forgetting, merely changing" (130). Similarly, the act of "merely changing" for Mahon may not point to the "ideological revisionism or a technical tinkering", but "the unfixing" (Denman 37). In an interview, when asked about what system of values a poet would arrive at when myth, magic, and religion are not available options, the poet responded that "I don't feel the need to impose an order where none too obviously exists" ("Interview" 15). What makes Mahon alert is perhaps not the idea of values, but the idea of system. Confessing that he "was never oppressed by Yeats" (17), Mahon does not aim at a Yeatsian gyre that keeps on widening to create a systematic value, but an unstable textual body that ironically stands against the force of establishment.

For example, in "Rage for Order," the penultimate word in the last line of the poem has experienced several revisions. In Mahon's 1972 collection *Lives*, it appears as "germinal"; then it turns to "desperate" in *Poems 1962-1978* which was published in 1979. And the word eventually settles on "terminal":

Knowing it cannot be
 Long now till I have need of his
 Germinal ironies.

(*Lives* 23)

knowing it cannot be
 long now till I have need of his
 desperate ironies.

(*Poems 1962-1978* 44)

Knowing it cannot be
 Long now till I have need of his
 Terminal ironies.

(*Collected Poems* 48)

For Michael Allen, the placing of “desperate ironies” in the 1979 version suggests “a combination of incoherence and hypocrisy, an impression not mitigated by the final loose repetition of the word ‘desperate’” (115). And because of the revisions, Allen writes that “one is virtually reading two different poems” (116). However, the transition from the initial “germinal” to the later “desperate” and “terminal” does not necessarily indicate that the authorial intention undergoes a total change, nor does it imply that a completely different reading is needed, which is tricky, since the change of words would normally invite a different view. Though the revisions here do present a transition in meaning, the transition is not as direct and obvious as it seems to be. Mahon abandons the repetition of “desperate” and instead employs the word “terminal” that rhythmically inherits the word “germinal” in the initial version and at the same time, retains the “desperate” tone of the second version. Then each of the words is strangely tinted with the meaning of the other and together they give back an ironic echo of their own. The presence of “terminal” ironically points to a germinal force that lays behind it and the germinal aspect also contains within itself a looming desperate or terminal tone. Thus, the changing modifier here is both itself and more than itself. The connotations of the three different words are inherently and implicitly interwoven, and in this manner, the poet’s stance has become ambivalent. While acknowledging the indispensable role that the poet’s ironies play in the speaker’s making of history, Mahon has struggled with the very nature of the ironies that resist being pinned down to a single view. Swinging between the two extremes, the poet presents a changing and evolving attitude towards the poem’s ironies, revealing the entwined and complicated facets that need to be explored. Then the revisions here become a part of the ongoing flow that implicitly connects the seemingly contrasting tones, and the multiple facets of the poems are revealed through the change of words. Through the revisions, Mahon shifts his perspectives from one extreme to another, creates a nuanced intertextual link, and makes his intentions all the more irresolvable by blurring the boundary between the contrasting forms of irony.

The poet’s “changing metabolism,” undercutting a stable poetic construction, is also on its way to building up different compounds for the changing contexts. As Haughton writes, “For Mahon each publication is its own context, an opportunity for re-exhibition of his work” (5). Thus, the poet’s poetic instability, with its self-creation and self-annihilation, should be read within its own context, as each revision can be a “historical metamorphosis” that takes place in due time (203). “Courtyards in Delft,” for instance, is a poem that has experienced major revisions. The poem itself is based on a 17th-century Dutch painting by Pieter de Hooch. In the 1981 collection *Courtyards in Delft*, the poem contains four stanzas. As the first poem that appears in *The Hunt by Night* (1982), it contains five stanzas. And it again goes back to four stanzas both in *Selected Poems* (1991) and *New Collected Poems* (2011). The first version ends with “While my hard-nosed companions dream of war / On parched veldt and field of rain-swept gorse” (*Courtyards* 21) and the new final stanza in *The Hunt by Night* brings a different dimension. As the opening poem of *The Hunt by Night*, the

added stanza strengthens “the paradoxical relationship between the poem’s domestic utopia and the violent Belfast-like city” and serves as an implicit clue for the unfolding of the whole collection (Haughton 159). The poet writes:

For the pale light of that provincial town
Will spread itself, like ink or oil,
Over the not yet accurate linen
Map of the world which occupies one wall
And punish nature in the name of God.
If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,
Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,
We could sleep easier in our beds at night.

(Mahon, *Hunt* 10)

As Roland Barthes writes, “it is not the image which comes to elucidate or ‘realize’ the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image” (25). Similarly, reading the lines of the poem is about not only following the poet’s poetic representation of pictorial images, but also tracking the poet’s own perspectives and his changing mental visions. The added stanza both implies a continuation of the “oblique light on the trite” at the beginning of the poem and a deviation from it. “[T]he pale light” in the first line of the stanza directs the perspectival sequence back to the first stanza in this poem where the “oblique light” appears. However, the spreading light also hints that the stanza will spread itself and stretch the context further “like ink or oil.” If the poet already starts to change the scene and relocate the place in the fourth stanza by inviting himself as a boy who lived there “with a taste for verse” and his “hard-noised companions” into the poem, then the added final stanza carries the relocation further (Mahon, *Hunt* 9). The phrase “provincial town” subtly indicates a transition from the Dutch landscape to an Irish context. Discussing parochialism and provincialism, Kavanagh remarks: “In Ireland we are inclined to be provincial not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial” (206). Echoing Kavanagh, Mahon’s phrase “provincial town” works together with “pale light” (*Hunt* 10) to stress a lack of the “parochial mentality” that holds faith in the “social and artistic validity of his parish” (Kavanagh 206).

In the following lines, “the not yet accurate linen / map of the world” naturally shifts the perspective to a different scene. The map here, for Leonard Sanders, implies that Mahon may “in fact, have another painting in mind, *An Interior Scene* also by De Hooch, or the large wall maps common in other paintings of the period” (42). But whatever the map might be, the linen texture of the map succeeds in bringing the view back to the Belfast linen industry. For John Goodby, the transition, revealing “the gross facts of Ulster,” disturbs the “delicate balance of claims on Mahon’s imaginative allegiance” (102). However, the disturbance here also further bridges the distance between the foreign land and the domestic chaos, driving the poem toward a more urgent circumstance. Similarly, the punishment of God in the following lines, disturbing the “trim composure” and “the chaste / Precision of the thing and the thing made” (Mahon, *Hunt* 9), again stresses a domestic place troubled by “fire and sword.” Thus, a subtly different literary

and historical context is presented through the revised poem. As the first poem in *The Hunt by Night*, “Courtyards in Delft” is closely followed by poems about Northern Ireland such as “Derry Morning,” “North Wind: Portrush,” and “Rathlin Island.” The revised version more explicitly shifts the attention to the poet’s domestic experience and hints that the collection unfolds towards a local concern. If, as Haughton says, “metamorphosis is the overriding preoccupation of *The Hunt by Night*, a book of changes” (153), then the added fifth stanza in this collection completes the metamorphosis from light to the darkness of night, from the pictorial image to real-world turbulence, and from a foreign context (elsewhere) to familiar domestic circumstances (here). Through the revisions, Mahon implies that the connection between the past and the future, between what has been written and what will be written, is not a stable one and is subject to the change of literary contexts and historical moments.

As discussed above, Mahon’s emendations display “the tricky relationship to history, to time, and to the subject they together construct” (Ben-Merre 71). And when it comes to the lyric “I”’s ongoing metabolism, Mahon presents a changing mind through what is lost and altered. For example, the original version of “Day Trip to Donegal” in *Night-Crossing* (1968) includes an extra stanza. And it is later removed in *Poems 1962-1978*, *Selected Poems*, and *New Collected Poems*. The poet writes:

How could we hope to make them understand?
Theirs is a sea-mind, mindless upon land
And dead. Their systematic genocide
(Nothing remarkable that millions died)
To us is a necessity
For ours are land-minds, mindless in the sea. (Mahon, *Night-Crossing* 22)

During the one-day journey, the speaker, seeing “herring and mackerel, flopping about the deck / in attitudes of agony and heartbreak” at the fishing port, also experiences his own “agony and heartbreak” (22). The landscape here, as Haughton comments, “becomes a source of existential anguish” (29). In the *Night-Crossing* version, the later erased stanza provides a subtle connection between fish’s “sea-mind” and our “land-minds,” linking the “existential anguish” between creature and man. Though an inescapable rupture exists between the two mutually exclusive and incompatible minds—one is “mindless upon land” and the other is “mindless in the sea”—both of the minds ironically share the same fate: a mindless state, a “systematic genocide,” and the ironic unremarkable death. Within this stanza, Mahon secretly blurs the boundary between the “sea-mind” and “land-minds” by particularly differentiating them and hints that the dying fish and the speaker belong to the same community, a community that is ignored, undermined, and demolished. There is also something more ironic. It is “us” who causes the “systematic genocide” by constant fishing, an industry that “to us is a necessity.” Similarly, it is also “us” who habitually resort to violence to settle disputes during the course of human history, another ironic necessity to the human community. In this sense, the notion of “us” is tinted with hidden complicity. This stanza explicitly reveals the ongoing turbulence and violence in real life and artistically involves the opposition and

connection between two kinds of complicated minds. The deletion of this stanza largely underplays the sense of community that was initially underpinned by the complexity in the collective "mindless" state.

This later deleted stanza, which was the third stanza of six, also functions as a link leading to a change of place and time. The fourth stanza begins with "we left at eight, drove back the way we came" and from this stanza on, the journey starts its second half (Mahon, *Night-Crossing* 22). The original six stanzas together create a sequential balance and the stanzas progress as the time passes. In the revised version, due to the deletion of this stanza, the previous stanzaic symmetry is broken and then the perspective is more rapidly shifted to the inner workings of the speaker and a "Wordsworthian retrospect" that serves as "less a source of comfort than of alienation" (Haughton 29). Without direct reference to violence and the comparison between human minds and fish mind, the revised poem itself is more like the speaker's meditation with the slow sea constantly "performing its immeasurable erosions." The poetic energy retreats to the mindless speaker and thus the sense of alienation is strengthened. The poet also made some changes in the last stanza:

At dawn I was alone far out at sea
 Without skill or reassurance (nobody
 To show me how, no earnest of rescue),
 Cursing my mindless failure to take due
 Forethought for this, contriving vain
 Overtures to the mindless wind and rain. (Mahon, *Night-Crossing* 23)

At dawn I was alone far out at sea
 Without skill or reassurance – no body
 To show me how, no promise of rescue –
 Cursing my constant failure to take due
 Forethought for this; contriving vain
 Overtures to the vindictive wind and rain. (Mahon, *New Collected Poems* 26)

Without the "mindless" ground laid by the initial third stanza, the repetition of the word "mindless" in the ending verses would be largely meaningless. Thus, the poet has changed the repetitive "mindless" for "constant" and "vindictive," rendering more vigorous emotional intensity. The two words sharpen the tone of the end of the poem and imply that though the "systematic genocide" does not explicitly appear in the poem, the haunting violence and death are never far away. Thus, the revised ending becomes more bleak and haunting due to the change of word: the promise cannot be made, the violence is looming large, and the failure is ineluctable confronted with hostile "wind and rain." Mahon makes a similar revision in "Spring in Belfast." The poet changes the line "The spurious mystery in the knowing / nod" in the *Night-Crossing* version to "The hidden menace in the knowing nod." The initial "mystery" transforms itself into the "menace," exposing a growing sense of danger. In "Day Trip to Donegal," Mahon also stresses a kind of hidden menace that lurks around, and the poem is secretly wrapped in both a sense of isolation and

threat in the revised version. The speaker, separating himself from “us” and “we,” further exposes himself to greater danger and challenge alone. Compared with the initial version, the revised one places more emphasis on individual alienation and loss, presenting the speaker’s private anguish which cannot be easily appeased rather than the explicit social anxiety. Nonetheless, the different versions, slighting focusing on different aspects of Mahon’s typical “metaphysical unease,” contribute to revealing the complex and never final inner workings of the poet. The “I”’s “changing metabolism” frustrates a “final authorial intention on which to base a choice” and implies that the different versions exist not to be simply compared and evaluated, but to be approached with a changing perspective (Denman 30).

The poetic instability of Mahon’s practice of revision, which aims not the remaking of poems but its contrary, blurs the boundaries between different versions, stimulates new readings, and complicates the intertextual links. The poet’s obsession with revisions makes the behavior not a mere act of adjusting or correcting. It seems that the poems exist not to be preserved, but to be excised and edited. And thus, all the words and lines are endowed with a predetermined uncertainty and a resistance to fixity. Borges has written similarly in “The Art of Poetry”:

Art is endless like a river flowing
 Passing, yet remaining, a mirror to the same
 Inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
 And yet another, like the river flowing (159)

Mahon’s poems and his habitual revisions also show a deep affinity with the Beckettian view on art and language. From Louis MacNeice to Paul Muldoon, many modern Irish poets wrote about how Beckett influenced their way of poetic creation. Yet “it is Derek Mahon,” as Mark Nixon insists, “who has, more than any other Irish poet (and possibly any other poet), integrated Beckett into the very texture of his writing” (56). Mahon declared that he shared with Beckett the same soul landscape. The same inner topography largely builds upon the same force to confront the artistic creator with the impossibility of effective communication via a flawed tool. The Beckettian expression emerges from a strenuous struggle with the structure of language itself, as evidenced in *Not I*, *Watt*, *Molly*, and so many more. Words themselves are “the chief ingredient of the art of failure; they form that impenetrable barrier of language which forever keeps us from knowing who we are, what we are” (Coe 69). And this echoes Mahon’s voice in the poem “The Attic”:

I who know nothing
 Scribbling on the off-chance,
 Darkening the white page,
 Cultivating my ignorance. (*Collected Poems* 111)

An enclosed private attic setting brings a familiar sense of alienation and aloofness in Mahon’s early works. Here in this poem, the artistic control of language is under severe suspicion in a hermit poet’s workplace, accompanied with doubts regarding self-knowledge and the effectiveness

of poetry. The act of writing leads to the very accumulation of human ignorance rather than enlightenment, failure rather than hope. The question "Que sçais-je," recurring in Mahon's other poems like "The Sea in Winter," "Ovid in Tomis," and "Montaigne," presents a painful desire to leave the page unwritten and mute the human voice: "better to contemplate / The blank page / And leave it blank / Than modify / its substance by / so much as a pen-stroke" (Mahon, *Collected Poems* 162). As Gail McConnell comments, the poet's artistic endeavors are made "to write the self in existence and to erase the effort" (235). Self-creation and self-annihilation are achieved at the same time, leading to an ongoing tension between language and self, poetic witness and its (im) possibility.

For McConnell, Mahon's practice of post-publication revision is a "torturous process of eradicating and reauthorizing poetic material" (229). It is true that Mahon is a poet who "shares with Pope and Swift, and with Auden and MacNeice, a classical distrust of self" (McGuinness 129) and the poet may be, as McConnell said, "horrified by authorship and the absence of divine authority" (229). But it is unfair to see the poet's habitual practice in a wholly pessimistic way. The textual instability that has been accumulated through the poet's revisions, seen from another perspective, resists fixity and brings the unsettling body of work into the changing flow. Carmen Smith writes that "revision is to occupy a poem as spectator instead of as creator" (46). Mahon underplays his role as an authoritative creator who firmly commands the poems and instead transforms himself into a spectator who observes his own flowing poetry. The alterations of lines push the intertextual links toward a rich complexity and indicate a changing and developing context. The revisions of titles restructure the relation between the titles and the poems. If the title serves as a gate of the poem which waits to be pushed open, then the varying entrances provided by the changing gates would stimulate a different feeling each time readers and critics encounter the poem. And those minor revisions which, for Michael Allen, "need little attention" together contribute to the state of instability (98).

Keatinge points out that "there is an abiding sense in the writing of Mahon and Beckett of language as a devalued currency, forcing the poet to work with defective material or give up altogether" (110). Like Beckett, Mahon is deeply aware that the very resource that poetry relies on is ever-changeable, transitory, and almost unreliable. Yet if the language does exist as a kind of "devalued currency" and there is no such thing as the intrinsic value of his "final vocabulary," then for Mahon the words in his works need to be constantly re-coined to prevent further devaluation. The poet holds a poetic vigilance toward the former self, keeping the language faithful to a changing state of mind. The habitual practice of revision has thus become a way to retain the value of the currency of language and resist the possible decay of poetry as a dying art. In this sense, Mahon also shares with Beckett an unflinching inner impulse to invent and reinvent, to vision and revision: "Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried . . . Perhaps I have lived afterall, without knowing" (Beckett 194).

Haughton once dubbed Mahon "the Heraclitus of the Post-Modern" (5). It is worth noticing that the Mahonian Heraclitus does not seek a total deconstruction with a dazzling word play. Though there is noticeable presence of looming distrust towards the poetic construction, Mahon provides an underpinning afaith in the idea of poetry. Mahon writes in the ending stanzas of "An Image from

Beckett”:

The uprightness of its
Utilities and schoolchildren —
To whom in my will,

This, I have left my will.
I hope they have time,
And light enough, to read it.

(*Collected Poems* 41)

This poem is about the interplay between Beckettian dark and light, and a vision of the succession of life and death. In the initial version of the poem, the poet wrote “I hope they had time” instead of “I hope they have time,” the past tense indicating that the schoolchildren are all part of the dead gloomy past. The ending stanza thus leads to a dim prospect that offers nothing more than bleak imagination and a sense of futility. Mahon’s later change from the past tense to the present tense infuses the poem with a more genuine sense of hope and a latent promise of a brighter, safer future, different from the violent Northern situation. Through the revision, poetry operates as firm resistance of ignorance and barbarism and as evidence of humanity. This poem is itself a valid act against dark and futility and an unflinching faith in poetry writing. The underlying message is what Mahon writes in one of his prose pieces titled “The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama”: “The poetry nonsense sets itself up against regulation, system, utility. It is a last ditch of sanity in a naff world of exploitation and lies. It has no function and no exchange value ... It is independent, marginal, unimportant; and therein lies its importance” (*Selected Prose* 33).

In Mahon’s body of work, there is an ever-flowing textual river that resists being interpreted in the same way. As Rorty puts it, for ironists, the “final vocabulary” does not mean “the one which puts all doubts” and they don’t think the point is “to find a vocabulary which accurately represents something” (75). Similarly, Mahon’s “changing metabolism,” which does not aim at a stable construction or an ultimate accuracy, makes the “body” a changing, dissolving, transforming organism. The revised poems, which are “the same / And yet another,” deliberately keep their distance from the fixity that ends the vigor of metamorphosis. The poet’s “changing metabolism,” undermining the stable poetic construction, infuses the existing works with new stimuli, and it proves Mahon an ironist who cannot accept his “final vocabulary.” Through the revisions, the poet constantly returns to his work, and the practice of writing and rewriting makes what’s past present and what’s present unstable. And the very instability, as Lucy Collins comments, “has helped to destabilize the singular perspective, suggesting that the poem is always contingent - always still in process” (256). Functioning to destabilize the context, blur the authorial intention, and evoke more complexity, the instability of the poet’s “changing metabolism” constitutes the shifting layers in Mahon’s poetry.

The poet writes against a fixed and toxic system that involves not only the ingrained sectarianism in Northern Ireland, but also a more fundamental state of fixity that needs to be

“undermined from within” (Mahon, *Against* 58). Mahon said, “The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but between the fluidity of a possible life (poetry is a great lubricant) and the rigor mortis of archaic postures, political and cultural” (qtd. in Andrews 17). Mahon is keenly aware that the problem lies not so much in the conflicts between one community and another as between fluidity and fixity, the two intrinsically opposing states of life. In “Art and Reality,” the poet ironically juxtaposes “fun” and “funeral” in the line “the shining land of childhood, fun and funeral” (*New* 357). Implicitly referring to James Joyce’s word construction “funferall” that appears in *Finnegans Wake*, Mahon presents a seemingly contradictory coexistence of joy and sorrow, and hints at their subtle inner connection—the two sides of the same Joycean coin. For the poet, the coexistence of mutually exclusive elements presents both complexity and artistic accuracy. And Mahon’s unstable textual ground, typically pointing to the co-presence of contradictory forces and the state of “textual indeterminacy,” works to frustrate the singular view and resist fixity (Denman 29). As discussed above, though the state of instability may incur the “knots of contradiction,” the shifting layers in Mahon’s poems actually point toward the refusal of fixity and an effort to keep linguistic currency new (Gamble 36). As Mahon himself said, “I never put a name to my own position and I still can’t, which suits me fine. . . . [T]here is all this ambiguity. That is poetry” (qtd. in Wroe web). The shifting layers point us to the poetics of instability and make Mahon’s poetry a lasting source of rich complexity.

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