

Derek Mahon's Literary Consciousness and his Concern with Japanese Literature in his Early Period: *Night-Crossing*(1968) and 'Beyond Howth Head' (1970)

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Derek Mahon (1941-) has gained a wide reputation as being 'culturally rootless' among a range of literary critical opinions.¹ Compared to his contemporary Northern Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, who is closely tied up with an Irish ancestral tradition and 'digs deeper and deeper into the home ground', Mahon certainly deals with more international themes;² his scope is cosmopolitan. In fact, from his earliest work, Mahon adopts the stance of an exiled and bohemian outsider as his characteristic demeanour, and he candidly admits himself to be 'an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream', adopting John Hewitt's phrase.³ However, despite his treatment of worldly themes, it does not necessarily mean that Mahon completely discards or excludes Irish literary and cultural tradition from his poetry. Indeed, he began his literary career with a careful scrutiny of Irish traditional culture, as well as contemporary literary consciousness in Irish writing, by contrasting it with those of foreign countries. The first section of this essay examines Mahon's complicated view on Irish poetry and how his literary consciousness developed in the early period, dealing mainly with his first collection of poems, *Night-Crossing* (1968).

On the issue of Mahon's international concern, the development of his poetics and artistic enterprise, especially in the 70s, reached its climax in his increasing concern with Japanese literature. The title poem of *The Snow Party* (1975) includes a reference to the seventeenth century haiku poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-94), and has brought much attention to Mahon's use of Japanese literature.⁴ There is another reference to the Japanese literary artist even before the publication of *The Snow Party*. The verse letter 'Beyond Howth Head' has the mention of the twelfth century Buddhist and man of letters, Kamo no Chōmei (1155?-1216). Compared with Bashō, Chōmei has almost never attracted critical attention, but the reference to him

affords a key to understanding one of the central themes in the poem, namely the issue of attachment and detachment. Furthermore, this issue is important to Mahon in his struggle to express his fundamental idea of the world. It is difficult to know to what degree Mahon devoted himself to Japanese literature, but throughout his writings there is a sense that the ideas often found in Japanese literature underlie his work. The second part of this essay, through the investigation of 'Beyond Howth Head', will demonstrate the possible perspectives that Mahon might have got from the experience of reading Japanese literature.

I.

In 1970, Mahon wrote an essay entitled 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', giving his view on Irish literary tradition and culture. At first glance, the discussion seems to divide Irish poets into two distinctive categories, those of the North and those of the South. In doing so he seems to attempt to distinguish the Northern poetry from the poetry of the South. However, this essay expresses Mahon's fundamental literary consciousness, showing his critical insight into the Irish literary tradition in relation to contemporary poetry:

Traditional Irish practice, the example of the old Gaelic poetry, an intensively cultivated field of received metaphor (what has been called 'the Book of Kells syndrome') continues to exercise authority in the work of young poets like Michael Hartnett.⁵

It is evident from this statement that Mahon regards the widely exercised and established mode of Irish literary tradition as an 'authority'. This mode possibly originated in the Irish Literary Revival which flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, or in what Matthew

Arnold constructed as the ‘Celtic’ elements even before the Revival.⁶ Since the time of the Literary Revival, both inside and outside Ireland, a tacit understanding to meet conventional expectations has developed. It holds that Irish writers are obliged to concentrate on matters typically and apparently ‘Irish’ such as Irish mythology, political and historical events, Irish landscapes, and geographical images and names. To some degree, these modes of expression functioned as a means to differentiate Irish from British character, but in spite of its ambiguity in defining what is ‘Irish’, this tendency became predominant among both readers and writers. Accordingly, it brought about a literary standard and a so-called canon of accepted works on the basis of cultural insistence on supposedly the same ideology. Thus, this prevailing trend, allied with deliberately self-conscious nationalism, supplies Irish culture with oversimplified and narrowly defined images as stereotypical representations despite its complicated historical background.

In addition, by manifesting as a series of texts or practices, the trend became both an external pressure and an internal obsession for those who were actually engaged in Irish poetry. It dictated to the writers what should and should not be included in their writing, and formulated ‘a system of values *saturating* downwards almost everything within its purview’, as Edward Said aptly points out in discussing the power of culture.⁷

In an interview with Terence Brown, Mahon says that ‘I have no system’ or hierarchy of values. Mahon keenly perceived the invisible power and threat latent in the prevailing ‘Irish’ cultural tradition, and regarded it as something restricting the poet’s creative imagination and depriving him of freedom in creative writing.⁸ His first collection of poems, *Night-Crossing*, illustrates his strong sense of constraint in the face of the authoritative power of cultural tradition and at the same time his desire to escape from such constraint. ‘Spring in Belfast’ (originally entitled ‘In Belfast’ and then ‘The Spring Vacation’), for example, explicitly portrays the poet’s figure as one who is uncomfortably restricted by such a force:

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

But yield instead to the humorous formulae,
The spurious mystery in the knowing nod;
Or we keep sullen silence in light and shade,
Rehearsing our astute salvations under
The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God. (6-15)⁹

Here, Mahon articulates that ‘*all*’ Irish poets, presumably including himself, could be the typical ‘Irish’ poet if they were capable, consciously or unconsciously, of accepting the tendency to deal with what the culture demands. Although it might require considerable compromise on the part of Irish poets, this is the way in which a poet in Ireland has been traditionally classified as an ‘Irish’ poet by readers both academic and public, and both inside and outside Ireland: ‘for there it is, / Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible’. On this point, it is worth noting that Mahon used the words, ‘The hidden menace’, in the version of ‘Spring in Belfast’ in *Poems 1962-1978* (1979), instead of ‘The spurious mystery’ in the quotation above. The words, ‘The hidden menace’, suggest the threat of systematised thought to differentiate something not traditional as alien to the cultural community in the constant process of inclusion and exclusion. The less ironic and more indirect expression of ‘The spurious mystery’ seems to imply the poet’s intention to divert the brunt of his own criticism of such a cultural literary world away from his surroundings towards a more obscure Yeatsian mysticism and the poet’s liability for his own topic.

However, Mahon, unwilling to go along with the mainstream by assisting such stereotypical representations, wisely attributes his unwillingness to ‘a perverse pride’ in his mind. This sort of twisted perspective allows him to avoid adjusting his attitude towards the surroundings that dominate him, and to avoid accepting such conventional established ‘formulae’ that inevitably arouse a sense of centrality and authority. At the same time, it is precisely this perspective that enables him to observe the world from a distance and to adopt the stance of an exiled, eccentric and bohemian outsider as his characteristic demeanour, even while at home.

In the following stanza, Mahon, dissociating himself from the collective tradition, declares:

One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
The things that happen in the kitchen houses
And echoing back streets of this desperate city
Should engage more than my casual interest
Exact more interest than my casual pity. (16-20)

For Mahon, the 'Irish' poets, who could 'assimilate to the traditional aesthetics which are their birthright some of (to risk pretentiousness) the cultural fragmentation of our time', neglect the reality of ordinary life by depicting Irish landscapes in the past which entail ancient Irish cultural tradition.¹⁰ As a result, Mahon sets out to explore the stark reality of ordinary things which are ignored in the Irish mainstream, and which surround human life in 'A worldly time under this worldly sky—' ('Glengormley', 20).

Mahon is conscious enough of the risk that his attitude could be taken as escapism from social and political responsibilities, whereas Yeats affirmatively imposed such responsibilities on himself, regarding them as a part of a poet's obligation. However, Mahon also admits the intrinsic power of the act of writing:

Battles have been lost, but a war remains to be won. 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. The poets themselves have taken no part in political events, but they have contributed to that possible life, or the possibility of that possible life; for the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem is a paradigm of good politics—of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time.¹¹

What is crucial for Mahon in writing is not a matter of religious, political or cultural debate, but more artistic and moral responsibilities to pose a question about what is taken for granted and to throw other 'possible life' and perspectives into the cultural community: 'a light to lighten the darkness'. That is, as 'The Forger' makes clear ('I revolutionized their methods', 16), his poetry represents a challenge to the formulated, paralysed and ossified ideas, 'the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural'.

This image of cultural paralysis coincides with the grotesquely depicted image of fish in 'Day Trip to Donegal', especially in the early version which appeared in *Night-Crossing*. While describing the automatic homing instinct of the fish despite mass slaughter, the poem reveals that even people suppressed by authority are nothing but victims of cultural force. Moreover, with the image of the ocean alluding to brainwashing,

the poem portrays the poet's crisis of individual creative imagination:

That night the slow sea washed against my head,
Performing its immeasurable erosions—
Spilling into the skull, marbling the stones
That spine the very harbour wall,
Uttering its threat to villages of landfall. (20-24)

Despite his desire to make his poetry 'a light to lighten the darkness', many of his early poems reveal the poet as an isolated figure who feels he cannot attain such a desire unless he can devise a method of confronting cultural tradition.

Yet, what Mahon's poetry has risked is not only the possibility of being construed as escapism but also the possibility of being interpreted as mere religious or political discourse. He states in 'Glengormley' that 'By / Necessity, if not choice, I live here too' (23-24), rather than for religious and political justice to fight for his rights through direct involvement in the nationalist cause. As a result, Mahon's work, as a whole, demonstrates his astute observations made while questioning the value and power of art in general, in relation to the cultural demands that are once expressed in the phrase 'Their systematic genocide' ('Day Trip to Donegal', 15). Mahon more explicitly expresses this terribly demanding condition as being 'under / House arrest' (1-2) and isolates himself from the dominant surroundings in 'Jail Journal' (originally entitled 'The Prisoner'). However, Mahon as a poet acknowledges that even if

It's taking longer than almost anything—
But I know, when it's over
And back come friend and lover,
I shall forget it like a childhood illness
Or a sleepless night-crossing. (16-20)

This could be Mahon's moderate but clear manifesto. While he admits that it will take time to break the power of authority, his lifework nonetheless persists with the challenge to do so. In this view, the last word, 'night-crossing', as chosen for the title of the collection, is highly suggestive. On the one hand, it indicates 'a challenging ordeal' of a semantic breakthrough in Irish tradition and culture; on the other hand, it represents his endeavour to achieve a cross-cultural imagination and experience as a means to this end.¹²

Thus it is not surprising that, in the 'Introduction' to

The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry (1972), Mahon redresses the relatively simple classification of the North and the South according to geographical regions; such classification fosters a tendency towards exclusiveness. Instead, he brings both together under the context of the ‘Irish situation’ using Conor Cruise O’Brien’s definition of the Irish poet.¹³ What Mahon takes as the basis of a feature which is common to both jurisdictions is the ‘duality of cultural reference’.¹⁴ Since the time of Yeats, Irish poetry in the South has been preoccupied with ‘the redefinition of the national psyche’, what is called ‘Anglocentricity’.¹⁵ However, Mahon notices a shift from it to ‘a new “European” orientation’ with ‘a renewal of interest in the old Gaelic poetry’.¹⁶ This argument owes much to the fundamental idea and function of translation; it contains both English tradition, because it is written in English, and European or Gaelic characteristics, suggesting a non-English medium, because of its original texts. In fact, as Hugh Haughton admits, translation plays an important role in Mahon’s poetic creation and literary consciousness throughout his writing, and the idea and function of translation develop in parallel with his poetic themes.¹⁷

This shift found in the South supplies Mahon with a way to locate the Northern poets within the realm of Irish poetry, since they inherit ‘duality of cultural reference’ resulting from their ambiguous ethnic and cultural situation; ‘their very difference assimilates them to the complexity of the continuing Irish past’.¹⁸ On the one hand, by making the ‘Irish situation’ ambiguous and by welcoming the ‘new willingness to experiment with styles and idioms that once seemed strange and inappropriate’, Mahon succeeds in creating a space for his cross-cultural endeavour within the range of Irish poetry;¹⁹ on the other hand, he directly confronts this ambiguous issue of ‘Irish situation’ or rather ‘Irishness’, exploring ways to incorporate it into his individual and characteristic voice. In this respect, the sense of ambiguity is necessary. It opens up the possibility of expanding Irish themes into international cultural motifs. In other words, if it is possible to make a link between what is usually taken as standing for Irish and certain features found in other cultures, then they could be subsumed under this ‘duality of cultural reference’. In addition, this possibility of alluding to both national and international contexts simultaneously could dilute the monopoly of Irishness. His active involvement with international themes, texts, and cultural references is on the basis of a premise that Irish themes could share

their identities with international recognition and could be transformed into international themes. Accordingly, Mahon as a poet takes on the role of mediating between ‘Irishness’ and international themes, and thereby his voice to negotiate this dilemma between these two: ‘the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source’.²⁰

This same dilemma can be found most explicitly in the sequence of ‘Breton Walks’, which consists of a series of four poems. The second poem of the sequence, ‘Man and Bird’, records the poet’s failure to unify the outside world with his encounter with wild birds. This failure confronts him, giving rise to the realization of an impassably deep gap between ‘their world’ and ‘the world of men’; ‘Neither of us can understand’ (16). Mahon conspires to become a part of the outside world in order to emerge from his present condition of feeling constrained. Yet, faced with this otherness, he cannot incorporate himself into the outside world, nor situate himself either inside or outside this category. His apparently emotional response to the outside world (‘Which irritates my *amour-propre*’, 9), arises from his sense of dilemma between restraint and desire, forcing him to undergo a self-centred identification in the third poem of the sequence, ‘After Midnight’: ‘I am man self-made, self-made man’ (5). As a result, he exposes a wretched desperate selfhood, showing his solipsism and evoking the main character in Beckett’s novel *Molloy*, with whom he chooses to identify himself in the fourth poem of the sequence, ‘Exit Molloy’:

I am not important and I have to die.
Strictly speaking I am already dead
But still I can hear the birds sing on over my head.
(7-9)

As if responding to the sequence of ‘Breton Walks’, Mahon, projecting himself upon the painter Van Gogh, portrays the artist’s figure as a bird in a cage in the poem ‘A Portrait of the Artist’ (initially entitled ‘Van Gogh Among Miners’, then ‘Van Gogh in the Borinage’):

Shivering in the darkness
Of pits, slag-heaps, beetroot fields,
I gasp for light and life
Like a caged bird in springtime
Banging the bright bars. (1-5)

There is a paradox in the representations of his restrained

sense and his desire to get rid of it in his early poems. Though he seeks freedom from this confined condition, the tendency to situate himself at the centre of the poem is predominant on the level of self-representation, just as is made clear from his Beckettian self-identification. The more his desire to escape from the restrained condition strengthens, the more he aspires to locate himself at the centre of the poem. Consequently his desire to transcend his compulsion and transform his dilemma leads him to his search for a way to negotiate his voice within a broader context, that of the international and universal pattern of life.

II.

Mahon's first verse letter, 'Beyond Howth Head', first appeared in 1970 in the form of a pamphlet, and later the revised version was included as the closing poem in his second collection, *Lives*, in 1972. In this verse letter, Mahon recollects the past history and literature of the world. Identifying a named addressee, the poem successively invokes various authors: Yeats, Spenser, Beckett, Egan O'Rahilly, Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Milton, Auden, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and so on. In doing so, the poet considers in general what life is, in a colloquial and relaxed style.

This form of verse letter allows Mahon's thoughts somewhat discursively to travel through Ireland and other countries, back and forth, and to create a panoramic perspective. This discursiveness fulfils its potential of freeing the addressee and the readers from the restriction of fixed ideas, moderating their nervous tension and assuring them that 'The pros outweigh the cons that glow / from Beckett's bleak reductio—' (25-26). It is as if the poem is intended to create a space in which to generate a frank and informal discussion by presenting a view of 'the world beyond' (46) as the title suggests. On this point, it is important even for the poet that the poem locates 'specifically Irish references and allusions side by side with a varied array of ready-to-hand, world-wide bricolage' as Frank Sewell points out.²¹ The poem deals with some grave issues in Ireland and around the world such as the depopulation of the west of Ireland, Irish sexual morality, British Imperialism, American involvement in the Vietnam War, and the issues of nuclear power, piety and eremitism. Despite these serious subjects, the discursiveness created by the poet's panoramic perspective sets him in an unsettled, uncertain position, and helps to prevent him from falling back into

solipsism. His dogged insistence on a single-perspective viewpoint eventually prevails.

In the face of the cruel reality in the Irish and world history depicted in the poem, Mahon considers the life of a hermit at the climactic stage:

I too, uncycled, might exchange,
since 'we are changed by what we change',
my forkful of the general mess
for hazelnuts and watercress
like one of those old hermits who,
less virtuous than some, withdraw
from the world-circles lovers make
to a small island in a lake. (129-36)

Mahon's attitude here might resemble Yeats's in 'Sailing to Byzantium', in which Yeats also expresses his wish, though tentatively, to withdraw from the world full of 'Those dying generations' to 'the holy city of Byzantium'.²² At the last stage of the poem, however, Yeats wishes to transform himself into an enamelled bird as 'the artifice of eternity' and to hold onto community with his audience 'to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium' even in his withdrawal. By contrast, Mahon evokes Molloy in Beckett's novel by echoing the previous reference to 'uncycled' (107). Compared to Yeats, Mahon does not require the community to be his audience, nor claim to be the subject who is singing for others, but is eager to listen to the voices of those who are ignored or things thought to be meaningless, or of nature: 'thin cries of a surviving bird' (108).

In terms of the interpretation of his attitude of withdrawal, this scene reminds us of Mahon's poem 'Exit Molloy', the fourth poem of the sequence 'Breton Walks'. However, there is a crucial difference between the scenes in 'Exit Molloy' and in 'Beyond Howth Head'. Whereas the poet in the former, connected with his own self-centred identification, chooses to disclose his solipsistic aspect, the attitude in the latter, followed by the description of a hermit, could be taken as a kind of self-surrender and detachment from the world.

In fact, one of the central themes in 'Beyond Howth Head' is the question of attachment or detachment. It is worth noting that Mahon wrote a review called 'A Few Images' in 1975, surveying the Imagist attitude towards poetry and Yeats's application of a Japanese Noh play to his own play. Mahon articulates his recognition that the essential element and the purpose of the Japanese Noh play is to teach 'the concepts of nonattachment and

peace', quoting Miss Qamber's words.²³ It is exactly when he addresses the issue of 'nonattachment' that Mahon invokes the twelfth-century Japanese Buddhist and man of letters, Kamo no Chōmei, in 'Beyond Howth Head'.

Concerning the reference to Chōmei, Mahon indicates its source in the note to the poem.²⁴ It is Basil Bunting's lengthy poem, 'Chomei at Toyama' (1932), which is a freely adapted version from the Italian translation of Chōmei's prose entitled *Hōjōki* (1212) in Japanese.²⁵ Since Mahon's verse letter directly quotes some phrases from Bunting's adaptation, it seems doubtful about whether Mahon read any other translations of Chōmei's *Hōjōki*. However, Bunting, in his entire work, omits the macron from Chōmei's name and from the name of a particular place (he describes 'Kamo-no-Chomei' and 'Toyama'). Mahon's addition of the macrons suggests that he might have read the English translation elsewhere.

The original version of Chōmei's *Hōjōki* records a time of great turbulence in terms of both civil unrest caused by the conflict between two clan families and of successive natural disasters, which wreaked havoc throughout and prompted Chōmei to withdraw to remote seclusion in a hut. It was in this time of hermitage that Chōmei wrote prose strongly influenced by Buddhism. The prose could be roughly divided into two parts: the first part depicts his realization of impermanence in the world and great grief over the tempestuous period, recurrently exploiting the image of a house as a metaphor for the vanity of worldly attachment; and the second part gives an account of his life in a hermitage with joy, considering it as the only available refuge and deeply reflecting on what living is.

In contrast, Bunting's 'Chomei at Toyama', affected by the writer's strong scepticism, turns the original Buddhist tone into biting satire and self-mockery with rough and colloquial expressions in terse and fragmentary form of verse. Especially in the latter half of the poem, the voice gradually assumes and augments its ego-centric tone.

What both Chōmei's original *Hōjōki* and Bunting's adaptation have in common is the realization of a paradoxical conclusion: that is, a failure in the attempt to attain the ultimate goal of detachment. This is the most bathetic scene in Bunting's adaptation:

Oh! There's nothing to complain about.
Buddha says: 'None of the world is good.'

I am fond of my hut . . .

For the same scene, Chōmei's *Hōjōki* translated by Donald Keene reads:

The essence of the Buddha's teaching to man is that we must not have attachment for any object. It is a sin for me now to love my little hut, and my attachment to its solitude may also be a hindrance to salvation.²⁶

In both works, even such a seclusion as hermitage, which is supposed to attain detachment from the world, assumes another kind of a threat of attachment; attachment to 'my hut' and 'attachment to its solitude'.

Mahon's 'Beyond Howth Head', by invoking the failure of Chōmei's detachment in a hermitage, effectively expresses hopeless calamity:

Chōmei at Tōyama, his blanket
hemp, his character a rank
not-to-be-trusted river mist,
events in Kyōto all grist
to the mill of a harsh irony,
since we are seen by what we see;
Thoreau like ice among the trees
and Spenser, 'farre from enemies',

might serve as models for a while
but to return in greater style. (137-46)

All of the three writers, Chōmei, Thoreau and Spenser, spent their lives in seclusion like a hermit and seemed to attain detachment from the world 'for a while'. Yet, it is only temporary since their lives gradually assumed a more self-centred aspect of attachment and a grand style, which nonetheless subsumes authority in itself. As John Redmond points out, 'Ereticism is seen as another kind of vanity'. Likewise, the above quotation from 'Beyond Howth Head' illustrates Mahon's stoic aspect which leads him to a strict recognition that detachment can be achieved but only temporarily.²⁷ Thus many of Mahon's words and references in the poem function as double-edged irony, which results from his reversible perspectives as in the words 'we are seen by what we see'.

It is worth noting that in 'Beyond Howth Head' Mahon includes not only an adaption ('we are seen by what we see', 142) but also a direct quotation ('we are

changed by what we change', 130) from W. H. Auden's 'New Year Letter':

... we are all insulted by
 The mere suggestion that we die
 Each moment and that each great I
 Is but a process in a process
 Within a field that never closes;
 As proper people find it strange
 That we are changed by what we change,
 That no event can happen twice
 And that no two existences
 Can ever be alike; we'd rather
 Be perfect copies of our father
 Prefer our *idées fixes* to be
 True of a fixed Reality.²⁸

This passage, to which Mahon deliberately leads the attention of his readers by use of the direct quotation, discloses an almost inevitable inclination to 'our *idées fixes* to be / True of a fixed Reality', where even freedom might become just a slogan rather than a possibility of life in the human mind. With the issue of identity evoked by the Irish national psyche, this fixed idea is associated with what Mahon struggled against in *Night-Crossing*. To this self-stabilizing operation of mind which is inclined to '*idées fixes*', Mahon renders a more appropriate word, 'Centripetal':

Centripetal, the hot world draws
 its children in with loving paws
 from rock and heather, rain and sleet
 with only Calor Gas for heat
 and spins them at the centre where
 they have no time to know despair (147-52)

Interestingly, in the scene following the quotation above, Mahon uses the image of a river flowing against the irresistible disposition of the mind, which coincides with the celebrated opening passage of Chōmei's *Hōjōki*:

The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings. ... The city is the same, the people as numerous as ever, but of those I used to know, a bare one or two in twenty remain. They die in the morning, they are born in the evening, like foam on the water.²⁹

This passage illustrates an example of Chōmei's understanding of and focus on the Buddhist concepts of impermanence or mutability, but Mahon addresses the common idea in his own poetry which goes beyond culture and religion.

... Anna Livia, breathing free,
 weeps silently into the sea,
 her tiny sorrows mingling with
 the wandering waters of the earth. (165-68)

The poet invokes 'Anna Livia', a personification of the River Liffey running through the city of Dublin. She supplies the poet with a symbol of Ireland or of Irish themes and with the image of flowing water at the same time. Mahon attempts to resist the notion of fixity by refusing sameness and expressing fluidity with constant regard to change. The above quotation would be Mahon's prayer for Irish poetry, a desire that Irish themes might be 'mingling with' international themes which are represented by 'the wandering waters of the earth'. In other words, the experience of reading Japanese literature, to some degree, contributed to Mahon's discovery of the possibility of an approach to something national and international through his cross-cultural imagination, and at the same time a theme of poetry; 'a fluidity of possible life'.³⁰

Notes

- ¹ Hugh Haughton, “‘Even now there are places where a thought might grow’”: Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon’, in Corcoran 98.
- ² Kelly 11.
- ³ Mahon, *Journalism* 94.
- ⁴ For instance, Douglas Dunn, discussing the poem along with ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’, points out the possibility of coincidence between the old Irish legend of Beltane and the Japanese mythological Sun-Goddess to which the Ise shrine is sacred. Then responding to this discovery, Brian Donnelly suggests that there is ‘a central similarity underlying the very different cultures of Ireland and Japan’. Recently, Judy Kendall considers ‘The Snow Party’ in the Japanese historical context, and Hugh Haughton closely examines the poem comparing it with Bashō’s *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel* published in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. See Dunn 80, Donnelly 29-30, Kendall 12-13, and Haughton 99-103.
- ⁵ Mahon, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’ 90.
- ⁶ In 1866, Arnold wrote *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, in which he argued about the Celtic elements and moulded the stereotype of the Celt. According to George Watson, this had a great influence on the Irish Literary Revival, although Arnold’s intention in writing it was, in part, to bring about a change in political and cultural hostilities between Britain and Ireland. See Howes and Kelly 36-45.
- ⁷ Said 9.
- ⁸ Terence Brown, ‘An Interview with Derek Mahon’ 15.
- ⁹ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations of Mahon’s poems are from *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1999), cited with line number in parentheses.
- ¹⁰ Mahon, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’ 92.
- ¹¹ Mahon, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’ 93.
- ¹² According to Terence Brown, ‘night-crossing’ refers to ‘the mail-boat crossing of the Irish Sea, then, before the era of cheap flights, often a challenging ordeal’, and he suggests that it represents ‘a migratory imagination for which journeys away from and occasionally back to a native place would constitute a defining way of being in the world’. See Brown, ‘Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness’, in Campbell 133.
- ¹³ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 14.
- ¹⁴ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 14.
- ¹⁵ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 13.
- ¹⁶ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 13.
- ¹⁷ See Haughton, “‘The Importance of Elsewhere’”: Mahon and Translation’, in Kennedy-Andrews 145-83.
- ¹⁸ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 14.
- ¹⁹ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 14.
- ²⁰ Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* 12.
- ²¹ Frank Sewell, ‘Derek Mahon: Coming in from the Cold’, in Kennedy-Andrews 191.
- ²² Yeats 217-18.
- ²³ Mahon, ‘A Few Images’ 759.
- ²⁴ For the note to ‘Beyond Howth Head’, see *Lives* 39. It is also included in the pamphlet version of the poem.
- ²⁵ For Bunting’s ‘Chomei at Toyama’, see Bunting 63-72. The Italian version called ‘Ho-jo-ki’, which Bunting mentions in his note, was translated by Marcello Muccioli. See Bunting 150, and Makin 63-73.
- ²⁶ Keene 202-03. In his translation, Keene gives Chōmei’s prose an English title, ‘An Account of My Hut’, along with its original title in Japanese.
- ²⁷ Redmond 107.
- ²⁸ Auden 167-68.
- ²⁹ Keene 189.
- ³⁰ Mahon, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’ 93.

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