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Decadent Tourism in Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book*¹

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Abstract

Derek Mahon in his *Yellow Book* addresses the issue of tourism as one of the realms of modern decline. Among numerous landscapes, the volume reveals a comparative Irish/Greek framework focusing on the two countries with substantial reliance on tourist industry. This article examines social connotations of tourism and a range of hesitant attitudes of the poet towards this phenomenon, indicating, as one of the reasons for this hesitation, the juxtaposition of domestic and foreign spaces.

Keywords: Derek Mahon, Irish poetry, tourism, *The Yellow Book*, Cyclades.

Résumé

Dans *The Yellow Book*, Derek Mahon aborde le tourisme comme l'une des manifestations du déclin moderne. Parmi de nombreux paysages, ce volume révèle une trame mettant en parallèle l'Irlande et la Grèce, deux pays fortement tributaires du secteur du tourisme. Cet article examine les implications sociales du tourisme et les hésitations que suscite cette question chez le poète, dues notamment à la juxtaposition de l'espace national/domestique et de l'espace étranger.

Mots clé : Derek Mahon, poésie irlandaise, tourisme, *The Yellow Book*, Cyclades.

In his *fin-de-siècle* volume, *The Yellow Book* of 1997, Derek Mahon ponders on a series of processes leading to contemporary disintegration where “the centre cannot hold”. As one of its reasons, the poet indicates pollution by tourism resulting in the formation of pseudo-places and tourist paradises; in globalisation and standardisation of tourism characteristic of consumerist and technologised societies; in commodification of mythical narratives including Greek and Celtic mythology and folklore; while the shadow of Yeatsian and Cavafian Byzantium looms high over the whole collection, marking the subtle border between the artifice, myth and reality. This article will try to decipher essential intertextual and interdisciplinary connotations of the poems from *The Yellow Book* addressing the problematics of tourism, and to identify the author's position *vis-à-vis* this expan-

1. This research was supported by a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme under REA grant agreement no. 623747. Project website: [www.irellas.com].

sive phenomenon transformed into a robust sector of economy. Apart from the universal perspective, it will also investigate the intersection of Irish and Greek landscapes which provides a nexus for Mahon's deliberations on tourism in the collection under discussion.

Although most of *The Yellow Book* is located in Ireland, among its most powerful and memorable images are those of the Cycladic archipelago, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere². Mid-way through the volume, "Aphrodite's Pool"³ apparently humorously depicts this Greek tourist paradise. Enjoying his holidays by a swimming pool on an Aegean island, the speaker of Mahon's poem shuttles between now, then and the future, from the Arcadian "god-familiar hills" through spaceships, to finish up as a decadent emperor facing the long-gone Atlantis. This self-mocking presentation of the holiday culture pivots one of the central themes of *The Yellow Book*: the one of *decadent tourism*. At the end of the collection, "Christmas in Kinsale"⁴ with its different glimpse at the Cyclades offers a spiritual or imaginary antidote to that decadence by counterbalancing a long catalogue which elaborated on Irish, global and cosmic civilisation in crisis. The last three lines of this poem – the "blue Cycladic dawn" when a human being faces nature in a solitary meeting – constitute a coda to the whole collection. Simultaneously separated from and attached to 'here' and 'there', this paradoxical Greek homecoming nurtures the potential and intensity of resisting the dubious blessings of the global village.

Taking a very general view of Irish and Greek tourism juxtaposed in *The Yellow Book*, one notices that Greece's reliance on tourism, one of the fastest developing branches of economy worldwide, is much more substantial than Ireland's. With the exception of merchant shipping perhaps, Greece has never had a competitive economic alternative to tourism and could only dream of becoming a "Hellenic Tiger", although one could venture a small-scale analogy with Ireland in other, pre-Tiger sectors such as agriculture or once flourishing fisheries. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of selling a tourist image of both Greece and Ireland provides one of the most fertile grounds for comparison between the two countries. Just as any other industry, tourism makes heavy use of marketing strategies. The Aegean, for instance, where the Cyclades are located, has been merchandised as "the symbolic landscape of Greek island tourism, the pure expression of the 3 S's (sea, sand, sun)"⁵ although sandy beaches are a rarity on Greek islands, not to mention

2. In my forthcoming book *Irish Poets and Modern Greece: Heaney, Mahon, Cavafy, Seferis*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. See also my chapter "Irish Poets on Paros: O'Grady, Mahon, Longley, Brennan", in the forthcoming collection of essays and poems: *Landscapes of Irish and Greek Poets* (ed. Joanna Kruczkowska, Peter Lang Oxford, scheduled for 2017).

3. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1997, p. 37-38.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

5. Theano S. Terkenli, "Towards a Theory of the Landscape: the Aegean landscape as a Cultural Image", *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Vol. 57, 2001, p. 197-208; quote p. 204.

their small size and lack of comfort when compared to the Northern European seaside. Analogously, a first-time visitor to the Emerald Isle who relies on the marketed image of the rolling green hills may realise only on arrival that many of them are unwalkable because of turf, which in addition forms a fawn and tawny moonscape leaving greenery to the visitor's imagination. Simplified and aggressive tourist campaigns contribute also to contesting critical spaces originally endowed with different meanings and now targeted for consumption. These spaces – both physical and mental – involve sacred, historical and mythological landscapes promoted as 'national heritage'. While antiquity and Middle Ages sell well in both countries, few tourists are aware of the – barely marketable – Greek and Irish civil wars and their traces. Recent conflicts equally clash with the interests of the tourist industry, although strangely enough, the acute 2015 bank crisis in Greece, for instance, did not translate into a decrease in the influx of foreign tourists.

Derek Mahon's *Yellow Book* engages with some of these problematics. Similarly to the issue of merchandising Greek mythology in "Aphrodite's Pool"⁶, "On the Automation of the Irish Lights"⁷ depicts the process of compromising Celtic sea mythology as tourist attraction in Ireland. Irish folk-lore in this poem stands for the departing wisdom of the sea culture, alongside lighthouses/ivory towers symbolising an older, profounder world of learning and eventually transformed into "visitor centres". Another poem, "An Bonnán Buí"⁸, reflects on current political and military conflicts as an obstacle to tourism. With the benefit of his first-hand Belfast experience and from the distance of an outsider⁹, Mahon ironically reports on the concerns of the inhabitants of the North immersed in the conflict: "Do we give up fighting so the tourists come/or fight the harder so that they stay at home?" While *The Yellow Book* was published between the ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement, and tourists indeed started to flock to the North at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, Belfast murals tours which cater for a specific branch of disaster tourism feeding on either genuine interest in recent history or sensation seeking inclinations remain a small-scale extravaganza. Yet another poem of the collection, "shiver in your tenement"¹⁰, mentions the times (1960s) before the advent of an intensely marketed strand of Irish tourism, the literary one: "The days before tourism and economic growth/... when pubs had as yet no

6. For a detailed discussion of how this poem relates to trading the myth in Greece, see Chapter 1 of *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* and my "Derek Mahon's Seascapes Mediated through Greece: Antiquity in Modernity, Nature in Abstraction", in Marie Mianowski (ed.), *Irish Landscapes: New Myths, New Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 69-80.

7. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 54-55.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 26-27.

9. The poet left Belfast in 1960s, returning briefly to the North as a Poet in Residence at the University of Ulster at Coleraine in 1977-79.

10. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 18-19.

pictures of Yeats and Joyce.” *The Yellow Book* registers the poet’s return from the United States to the understated Ireland of the Joyce Country, the Yeats Country, the Leopold Bloom tours of Dublin etc. Knowing that Mahon is a keen literary tourist himself¹¹ we realise that he must be drawing a decisive line between his own poetic ‘pilgrimages’ and mass flocking to the portraits of the bards.

His engagement with the questions of Irish tourism reminds the reader of his being on the one hand “a great poet of place,” as his monographer Hugh Haughton called him in an article¹², and on the other, “an exile and a stranger”, “the existential outsider” characterised by “migrant cosmopolitanism¹³”, “the poet of repeated dislocation¹⁴” as other critics observed following the more habitual trend in Mahon criticism. The poet would probably have embraced, before his settling down in Kinsale at least, the epithet he employed to describe one of his masters, Louis MacNeice: “A tourist in his own country.” “But of what sensitive person is the same not true? The phrase might stand, indeed, as an epitaph for modern man”, the poet continues¹⁵, raising the issue of tourism onto the level of philosophical discussion in the age of existentialism, postcolonialism and Zygmunt Bauman’s seminal theories of nomadism¹⁶.

Many of the arguments connected with tourism in *The Yellow Book* revolve around the concept of a pseudo-place. The first poem of the collection, “Night Thoughts¹⁷”, opens with the following epigraph from Paul Fussell’s *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*:

One striking post-war phenomenon has been the transformation of numerous countries into pseudo-places whose function is simply to entice tourists¹⁸.

In his book, Fussell remarks that “places are odd and call for interpretation. They are the venue of the traveler. Pseudo-places [the venue of the tourist] entice

11. See my *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* where I discuss his literary trips in Greece and in other places.

12. Hugh Haughton, “On Sitting Down to Read ‘A Disused Shed in Co Wexford’ Once Again”, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 31 No. 2, 2002, p. 183-198; quote: p. 185. On this theme, see also Frank Sewell, “‘Where the Paradoxes Grow’: the Poetry of Derek Mahon”, Coleraine, Cranagh Press, 2000.

13. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968-2008*, Cambridge, Brewer, 2008, p. 155.

14. Terence Brown, “Mahon and Longley: Place and Placeness”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell, CUP, 2003, p. 139.

15. Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*, Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, p. 25.

16. I discuss Mahon’s quote in the context of Bauman’s views in Chapter 1 of *Irish Poets and Modern Greece*. Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, London, Sage, 1996, p. 18-36.

17. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 12-13.

18. The quote without Mahon’s omissions reads as follows: “One striking post-Second War phenomenon has been the transformation of numerous former small countries into pseudo-places or tourist commonwealths, whose function is simply to entice tourists and sell them things” (Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, OUP, 1980, p. 43).

by their familiarity and call for instant recognition: 'We have arrived'¹⁹'. Ireland, just as Greece, abounds with pseudo-places: man-transformed, kitsch-selling tourist oases. In "Night Thoughts" Mahon depicts a transformation of a place into a similar pseudo-place: reshaping the "work of years", i.e. historical Dublin houses, into "a Georgian theme-park for the tourist". In one of the archival *Yellow Book* notebooks, Haughton has discovered a more dramatic fragment about the "beginning of the end for Fitzwilliam Square" with "the developers" in "the tempting park" performing "demolition and reconstruction"²⁰. Such processes of transformation necessarily entail a manipulation of memory, an imposition of alternative, hypothetical or subjective historical narratives, a re-forming of national heritage.

Theme parks, especially popular in Anglophone and Scandinavian countries, correspond to modern Greek replicas of ancient buildings or, in extreme cases such as Knossos, to the ostentatious reconstructions of archaeological sites. In various degrees operative worldwide, this trend of 'restoring' the past in Greece has been perplexingly dominated by foreigners for whom antiquity remains a paragon of beauty. Starting with the 19th century philhellenes, archaeologists and neoclassical architects (Arthur Evans, Heinrich Schliemann, Theophil Hansen) who erected ancient-style residences and public utility buildings in the heart of Athens, the list of foreigners inspired by antiquity continues into the present with ex-bohemian partial residents of Greek islands. Mahon admiring the "wash-house like a temple to the Muses" by the swimming pool in "Aphrodite's Pool" may be playing with this convention. Yet in "Night Thoughts" this foreign element intruding upon the local territory links to the concept of a pseudo-place not only via tourism but also through a different type of migration characteristic of a globalised economy. The poet employs the term "McAlpine's fusiliers" for construction workers at the Dublin theme park, borrowing the phrase from the 1960s ballad about the Irish unskilled labour emigrating to Britain in the late 1930s to work in the canals. While in the original song they work "with Russian, Czech and Pole/... underneath the Thames in a hole"²¹, now Poles and Czechs have been working on construction sites in Ireland. Although they officially started to contribute to the Irish economy only after their accession to the European Union in 2004, they may have had their (illegal?) share in the construction boom in Dublin at the time when Mahon's poem was written.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, OUP, 2010, p. 277. A different note in Mahon's notebook refers to Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (p. 273).

21. "McAlpine's Fusiliers", The Mudcat Cafe, 31 Jul 1999, Web, 20 May 2015, [<http://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=12665>].

The extent to which Mahon was prophetic about landscape transformations in Ireland – alongside Fintan O'Toole who probed them exactly the same year, coming to the conclusion that their “speed and scale... induced a sense of internal exile, a sense... that Ireland has become somehow unreal²²” – can be estimated from the current perspective of the post-crisis years. Eóin Flannery in his recent book *Ireland and Ecocriticism* comments that “the hangover from the Celtic Tiger period leaves many Irish citizens scrambling for a new set of codes... with which to engage with the altered landscapes of the country” and calls Mahon “a pioneering Irish poet of engaged ecological conscience” despite the fact that “symptoms of industrialism and indiscriminate urbanisation... both repel and fascinate Mahon’s humanism and aestheticism²³”, as the decadence in *The Yellow Book* had evinced as well.

In “Night Thoughts” the author equates tourist migration with an invasion where the multiplied ‘Other’ resemble aliens from outer space. To realise the scale of this expansion of tourism it suffices to quote one line of this poem, where “the new world order” emerges next to “the bus tours” as equally momentous (“Never mind the new world order and the bus tours²⁴”). Already back in 1975, Louis Turner and John Ash in their seminal *Golden Hordes* proposed a definition of tourism as “involving mass migration of people who collide with cultures far removed from their own²⁵”. Just as to any economic or political migration, this definition can be applied to Mahon’s perception of organised tourism in *The Yellow Book*. Although the invaders with their “baseball caps” in “Night Thoughts” bear resemblance to Americans visiting Ireland and would thus contradict a notion of “colliding with a culture far removed from their own”, the time and manner of their ‘visit’ as well as the locals’ reaction to it evidence a huge discrepancy with the host culture. The poet working at night, self-mockingly seeking “sententious solitude” and “ancient memory” reminiscent of the pre-Romantic Graveyard School, to his dismay inspects that incongruity “between three and four/before the first bird and the first tour bus.” When tourists turn up at four o’clock in the morning, the pseudo-place, to quote Fussell again, “calls for instant recognition: ‘We have arrived’”. Mahon observes with horror that “even in the bathroom I hear them shouting out there”. Describing this morning intrusion in science-fiction terms, Mahon’s “space invaders” pun plays on the notion of an extra-terrestrial on the one hand, and an invader of a domestic (private

22. Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of Global Ireland*, Dublin, New Island Books, 1997, p. 173 (qtd. after Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, op. cit., p. 266).

23. Eóin Flannery, *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice*, New York and London, Routledge, 2015, p. 2, 27, 24.

24. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, op. cit., p. 13.

25. Louis Turner and John Ash, *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*, London, Constable, 1975, p. 11.

and public) space on the other. The tension between the outer and the inner has been prompted by the *exclusion* of the tourist from the *place* and by their striving for *inclusion* in the familiarity of the *pseudo-place* domesticated by their self-confident behaviour and casual attire, however inappropriate it may look to the locals ("goofy in baseball caps and nylon leisurewear"). "The tourist is a dupe of fashion", Mahon could repeat after James Buzard's *The Beaten Track*²⁶, although the latter referred to the fashion for places, otherwise also manifest in *The Yellow Book*. Neither in Dublin nor in Greece is the poet immune to alien tourist invasions: in "Aphrodite's Pool", despite the solitary character of his travel, the speaker ("the incongruous visitor") who sits "aloof from the disco ships and buzzing bikes" remains intensely aware of their presence, just as he apprehends the planes passing over his head and the "perpetual motion" of the ships on the sea below.

Last but not least, in "Night Thoughts" American tourists-invaders evoke a notion of re- or counter-colonisation. America, colonised by a handful of nations who eliminated the natives and were further bolstered with influxes of immigrants from different countries including a significant population from Ireland and Greece, is now 'the empire that strikes back': touristically, culturally, politically, economically. That counter-colonisation emerges also in other poems of *The Yellow Book* in reference to the phenomena such as New Age, globalisation ("Christmas in Kinsale"), "yahoos, yuppies, yuppies, yoga, yoghurt, Yale" ("At the Chelsea Arts Club"²⁷), or even climate change: Irish "climate now [being] that of the world at large / in the post-Cold War, global-warming age / of corporate rule, McPeace and Mickey Mao" ("America Deserta"²⁸). In keeping with his paradoxes, Mahon calls himself "an alien among aliens during my New York time"²⁹, the phrase annotating (1) his own isolation in America, (2) American alienation of an-individual-in-the-crowd type, (3) America's isolation, and (4) American exceptionalism. This (post)colonial context comes to the fore when, back home from his stay in America, Mahon watches the news

...with sanctimonious European eyes
the continuing slave narrative, people in chains...
and the silent roar of "ant-like" migration...
...not far
from liberal republic to defoliant empir³⁰.

26. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1993, p. 1.

27. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Obviously, the concept of the defoliant empire emerges in the very title of "America Deserta" echoing deserted America and America as desert.

The second poem of *The Yellow Book*, "Axel's Castle", apart from castigating organised tourism and its standardisation resulting in exhaustion, also touches upon another vital concern of *The Yellow Book*: spiritual tourism, or rather, its surrogate, the turning places of worship into pseudo-places visited in the spirit of indifference and irritation:

in our post-modern economy
one tourist site is much like another site
and the holy city comes down to a Zeno tour,
the closer you get the more it recedes from sight
and the more morons block your vision³¹.

The superb "Zeno tour" joke sums up the case of tourism as subject to Zeno's paradoxes where motion remains an illusion of the senses since time and space can be divided *ad infinitum*. The tourist, in other words, can never reach his destination; he can only multiply, just as pseudo-places continue to spawn in a customised way irrespective of their location. Time and space being relative, the tourist experience is stripped of authenticity. Mahon's narrative, its rhythm and meaning, echo W. H. Auden's "First Things First":

...a world where every sacred location
Is a sand-buried site all cultured Texans do,
Misinformed and thoroughly fleeced by their guides³².

Incontestably, the "cultured Texans" show correspondence with tourists of Mahon's "Axel's Castle" as well as the American tourists of "Night Thoughts". Buzard quotes this fragment of Auden's 1950s poem in his *Beaten Track* in the context of "the wholeness of the wholly touristic place, inauthentic, trumped-up, corrupted, commodified", "an engulfing ersatz cultural domain, totally administered or pre-packaged as spectacle", observing that already in the 19th century flourished "uncomfortable impressions that tourism destroys the 'sanctity' or unity of culture³³". Part of Buzard's argument in the book rests upon the analysis of the stereotypes attached to anti-tourism; in this light, the affinity between Mahon's and Auden's poems appears all the more revealing.

Although in "Axel's Castle" Mahon speaks from the vantage point of the country's indigene, one may speculate whether the invectives he throws at tourists may not resonate with a deportment of an anti-tourist. As early as 1950s,

31. *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

32. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, New York, Random House, 1976, p. 445.

33. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*..., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Alan Brien identified the anti-tourist as the one tortured by “tourist angst”, i.e. “a gnawing suspicion that... you are still a tourist like every other tourist³⁴”. Fussell describes the anti-tourist as a pretending traveller motivated by self-protection and vanity³⁵. In “Axel’s Castle”, Mahon’s emblematic self-irony either completely commits him to the idea of self-protective and vain anti-tourism, or on the contrary, undermines this notion, when he defines himself as

an armchair explorer in an era of cheap flight
diverted by posters, steamer and sea-plane
at rest in tropical ports...
I get sea-breezes in my own galley all right.

This approach strikes elitist and democratic notes at the same time. As Graham Huggan writes in his *Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*³⁶, “late twentieth-century exoticisms are the products... of... a worldwide market – exoticism has shifted... from a more or less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption³⁷”. As an individual “diverted by [tropical] posters”, Mahon enjoys the egalitarian right to mass consumption of tourism; as an advocate of privileged aesthetic perception, however, he stays on the side of the elitist traveller. The aesthetic perception, obvious for any writer and embodied in his belief in the flight of imagination, is partly responsible for Mahon’s resentment of organised tourism: “why/travel”, he continues in “Axel’s Castle”, “when imagination can get you there in a tick/and you are not plagued by the package crowd?” This manifesto may also bring to one’s mind the poet’s mental travel via translation, the fruit of which he has gathered in *Adaptations* (2006) and *The Echo’s Grove* (2013). Alternatively however, this declaration sounds unusual for someone so well travelled as Mahon, whose sensitive relation with home (Northern Ireland) and seeming preference for undefined isolated locations or even displacement have attracted critical attention.

One may also wonder whether Mahon’s covet in “Axel’s Castle” may be symptomatic of a *spiritual anti-tourist’s*. Huggan suggests that “for spiritual tourists, [a] deeper involvement [with society and culture] includes a quasi-religious dimension. Society and culture are collapsed into a search for ‘inner meaning’” yet “the need for deeper involvement may actually *preclude* close cultural contact³⁸”. As transpires at the end of *The Yellow Book* (“Christmas in Kinsale”), Mahon’s private engagement with Greece transports him into a particular dimension of spiritual

34. Alan Brien, “Tourist Angst”, *The Spectator*, 31 July 1959, p. 133.

35. Paul Fussell, *Abroad...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

36. To an extent, both Ireland and Greece can be perceived as postcolonial margins, although they may have lost some of this status with the influx of immigrants after the 2004 EU accessions.

37. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 13.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

travel. *Travel*, not tourism, we should emphasise. Contrary to the views (such as Huggan's) that a traveller, an extinct species, has become nothing more but a tourist, I believe that the difference between a tourist and a traveller lies in the mode of perception and the style of travel. While a tourist searches for the recognisable (or the exotic) skimming the surface of reality, a traveller makes attempts, in a slow mode, to interact with local life. Where a tourist compares, a traveller differentiates. Having in mind probably the Grand Tour, Fussell observes that "before the development of tourism, travel was conceived to be like study, and its fruits were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of judgement"³⁹. I would argue that this is still possible, even if the traveller, according to Fussell, now situates himself between "the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration" and "the pleasure of 'knowing where one is' belonging to tourism"⁴⁰. In *The Yellow Book* however, before the reader reaches this stage in the final "Christmas in Kinsale", the author confronts him with tourists-barbarians in the never-land of Byzantium.

In *The Golden Hordes*, the authors attribute the "mass migration of people who collide with cultures far removed from their own" to both tourists and barbarian tribes. The authors provocatively diagnose that "today the Nomads of Affluence... are creating a newly dependent social and geographic realm: the Pleasure Periphery... a tourist belt surrounding the great industrialized zones of the world" such as the sea resorts of the Mediterranean⁴¹. Although Ireland cannot compete with the Mediterranean, its marginal geographical position and scarce industry contributes to the perception of the island as a part of the "tourist belt". "A comfortably dispersed population and a heavy reliance on imports has spared Ireland much of the true ecological cost of living in the developed world", Michael Viney observes in *A Living Island*⁴². Interestingly, Mahon notes in "An Bonnán Buí" that the margin of the margin, the North of Ireland, also starts to compete for a place in that belt, and time has shown, with moderate success. Musing on the invasion of tourists-barbarians, "An Bonnán Buí" was reprinted in Mahon's *New Collected Poems* of 2011. The peace process in the North being well under way, the poem was reproduced with a new ending⁴³: an invocation to "go with the flow"⁴⁴ reflecting the poet's preoccupation with the issues of global ecology and natural flow imagined as a pattern for social change in later volumes such as *Harbour Lights* and *Life of Earth*.

39. Paul Fussell, *Abroad...*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Louis Turner and John Ash, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

42. Michael Viney, *The Living Island*, Dublin, Comhar, 2003.

43. Consistently with Mahon's practice of ceaseless revisions.

44. Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 2011, p. 209.

It is interesting to observe on this occasion a peculiar shift in the perception of the barbarian related to travel and periphery in the Irish context: the one from the native to the tourist. At the beginning of his *Irish Orientalism* Joseph Lennon documents how for centuries “Irish histories opened with passages about the ancient origins of the Irish in the East... This written link between Irish culture and West Asian cultures has its roots in Ancient Greek and Roman depictions of borderlands: in Ireland, Asia and Africa where outlanders with magical and barbaric traits lived⁴⁵”. This perspective relates the reader of Mahon's *Yellow Book* to the colonial history of Ireland and to the negative perception of the native by the English coloniser, most famously by Edmund Spenser in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. Barbarians in *The Yellow Book* represent yet another perimeter of the empire. Manifest in the already mentioned American counter-colonisation of Europe and the clash of civilisations, of outer and inner space, the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial, the concept of the empire also underlies poems such as “At the Shelbourne⁴⁶” inspecting the fall of the Big House in Ireland and, periphrastically, of the British Empire; or “The World of J. G. Farrell⁴⁷” drawing a map, after Farrell, of the world where “the Union Jack comes down” (one of these places being “even, who knows... Ulster too”). Over all these connotations in *The Yellow Book* presides the shadow of another empire: the Yeatsian and Cavafian *Byzantium*⁴⁸. Mahon relishes images of declining empires just as Cavafy did, and on translating Cavafy in Greece in 1974 after the recent collapse of the military regime the Irish poet was reading Cavafy's favourite book, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*⁴⁹. The reader of *The Yellow Book* has to beware of trespassing the subtle border between myth and reality while rambling through Mahon's lands of make-believe which thrive on “the stuff of myth⁵⁰” and “perceptual difficulties, the *trompe-l'oeil* of virtual reality⁵¹” trying to weigh artifice and “artistry” against “the pastiche paradise of the post-modern⁵²”. The poet “creates personal mythology out of friends and idols” setting “the Bohemian decadence of the past against the modern late capitalist decadence” by means of style, Haughton observes⁵³. Decadence provides the author with “a model of the writer's alienation from the dominant ideologies of a utilitarian society”, David G. Williams

45. Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History*, Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 2008, p. 5.

46. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 16-17.

47. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

48. I refer to Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium” (rather than “Byzantium” despite their similarities) and to Cavafy's “Waiting for the Barbarians”.

49. For more details see Chapter 1 and 4 of my *Irish Poets and Modern Greece*.

50. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

53. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

adds, though Mahon often employs a self-mocking attitude on posing as *poète maudit*⁵⁴.

Excess and decadence, 'truth' and illusion, the pseudo-place, cultural and spiritual tourism, and the finality of destination all mingle in the spirit of Byzantium in Mahon's volume. Although the inauthentic tourist experience led the author to consider the position of an anti-tourist, in "Aphrodite's Pool" he emerges as a *mock tourist*, a "fat, unbronzed, incongruous visitor". The humorous tone of the poem can also indicate traits of a "'cool' and role-distanced" *post-tourist*, the term coined by John Urry in *The Tourist Gaze*. The post-tourist acknowledges tourism as a game with "emphasis on playfulness, variety and self-consciousness", or rather, "a series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience"⁵⁵. Mahon's speaker enjoying his holidays between "god-familiar hills" and "disco-ships"⁵⁶ is indeed "freed from the constraints of 'high culture'⁵⁷", whereas drifting on the raft in the swimming pool "under the fairy lights and paper frills/ of a birthday party" and flirting "like some corrupt, capricious emperor"⁵⁸ qualify him as an "untrammelled pursuer of the 'pleasure principle'", where "the world is a stage and the post-tourist can delight in the multitude of games to be played"⁵⁹.

The shadow zone of Byzantium in *The Yellow Book* also sneaks into "An Bonnán Buí". Arguments for or against tourists in Northern Ireland seem to be waged between complacency or compromise on the one hand and truth on the other, or between illusion and reality, where tourists are offered the first. The world devised for tourists-barbarians in Mahon's poem and in Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"⁶⁰ is an outcome of negotiation between barbarism and civilisation, populism and democracy, where cultural achievements have been raised (or rather, lowered) to the level of barbarian excess and superficiality. The glitter and glamour of precious jewellery and dress (Cavafy) and of "the shining city" (Mahon) go hand in hand with a ban on "illustrious speakers"... lofty oration and demagoguery⁶¹ (Cavafy) and "the bigots shrieking for their beleaguered 'culture'" (Mahon), neither of whom tourists-barbarians cannot understand. It could be argued that the Republic of Ireland and modern Greece both yielded to the barbarian-tourist invasion by embracing it as an alternative to older occupations

54. David G. Williams, "'A Decadent Who Lived to Tell the Story': Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book*", *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 23 No. 1, Summer 1999, p. 111-126; quote: p. 115, 114.

55. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London, Sage, (1990) 2005, p. 92, 91.

56. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

57. John Urry, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

58. Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

59. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze...*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

60. Quoted here in Stratis Haviaras' translation: C. P. Cavafy, *The Canon*, transl. Stratis Haviaras, Athens, Hermes, 2004, Cavafy Archive, 1995-2012, Web, 13 Dec 2015.

61. The original reads here δημυγορίες, which is a neutral term for "public speech".

(fishing, farming) which have been in decline ever since⁶². In Northern Ireland, if we were to believe Mahon's speculations in "An Bonnán Buí", "those people [the tourists-barbarians] would have been a solution, of sorts" (Cavafy) bringing a promise of economic profit and ironically, peace as its side effect. Yet the irony, much akin to Cavafy's, makes the reader suspicious about the marriage of tourism and peace, a marketing stratagem used by the tourist industry ever since the end of the First World War. Buzard observes how

the century which has lamentably defined itself as an era of "world" wars, of war-making made conceivable on a global scale, has also helped to sustain the dubious counter-image of tourism as a means to world peace and understanding. The installation of official tourist ministries in the aftermath of the Great War was justified and partly driven by such an ideal... [S]hortly after the Second World War, John Pudney... announced that "a travel agency, implying a liberty of choice and circulation, is the very antithesis of war"⁶³.

The author demonstrates how the trend of "A Philosophy of Tourism and Peace" continued into the 1980s, promoted by authors of an academic textbook on tourism⁶⁴ which employed totalitarian economic newspeak under the cover of "tourism's culture industry"⁶⁵. The history of Northern Ireland and consequently Mahon's own biographical background being riddled by acts of terrorism, one can pose a question whether at the present historical moment in the 21st century, defined by global terrorism, society regards the liberty of circulation as "the very antithesis of war".

Mahon has openly used Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" in an earlier poem located in Northern Ireland. Published in 1972 at the height of the conflict in Ulster, "After Cavafy"⁶⁶ later known under the title "Poem Beginning with a Line from Cavafy" (*Poems 1962-1978*)⁶⁷ opens with Cavafy's line "It is night/And the barbarians have not come." This line introduces the first part of Mahon's poem devoted to the heroic Celtic past, juxtaposing the Irish pastoral-historical narrative with the English coloniser's, or perhaps featuring exclusively the English narrative of the Irish (anti) pastoral. The second part of

62. The role of the European Union in this process of transformation is yet another matter.

63. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*..., *op. cit.*, p. 334-335. Internal quote from: John Pudney, *The Thomas Cook Story*, London, Michael Joseph, 1953, p. 173.

64. Robert W. McIntosh and Charles R. Goeldner, *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*, New York, Wiley, 1984, p. 485.

65. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*..., *op. cit.*, p. 333-334.

66. Derek Mahon, *Lives*, OUP, 1972, p. 24.

67. Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978*, OUP, 1979. See also my Chapter 4 of *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* devoted to Mahon's translations from Cavafy.

Mahon's poem, starting with the line "Or if they [barbarians] have [come]...", comments on the 'Troubles', where the barbarians engage in local populism, propaganda and (para)military actions. In a wider perspective, Mahon's 1970s collections including *Lives* proliferate with images of 'barbarians' as either 'savage' or 'primitive' civilisations, or the contrary, as the Western most 'civilised' culture. Two most famous poems of *The Snow Party* (1975), for instance, ironically collate empires, utopias and dystopias such as, on the one hand, the detached, stagnant Japan with its ceremonies ("The Snow Party"⁶⁸) or the "cold dream/Of a place out of time/a palace of porcelain" ("The Last of the Fire Kings"⁶⁹), and on the other, the European inquisition burning people at stakes ("Snow Party") and "the fire-loving people" of Northern Ireland ("The Last of the Fire Kings"). Similar ideas endure in *The Yellow Book* with its cause-and-effect sequence of barbarism and empire, where barbarism represents a domestic political force leading to the decline of the empire ("America Deserta"), and to the diffusion of barbarism outside of the empire in the form of tourism ("Night Thoughts").

To quote the more immediate, Irish, framework of Byzantium in *The Yellow Book*, the hidden and evident allusions to Yeats's poetry attest to Mahon's inevitable dialogue with the celebrated predecessor, starting with the volume's title hinting at the *fin-de-siècle* journal where Yeats would publish. "I have sailed the seas..." Mahon's traveller could repeat after Yeats, though the modern Cycladic paradise, objectively speaking, has little in common with the Yeatsian paradise of art; quite the contrary, "monuments of unaging intellect" lose the battle against carnal passions of tourism extolled in "Aphrodite's Pool". Destination, nonetheless, remains elusive for both poets; just as Yeats's artifice of Byzantium, a vision of lost Atlantis haunts "Aphrodite's Pool" ("underwater light/glows like Atlantis in the Aegean night"), paradoxically adding to the inauthenticity of this mock tourist experience. The apocalyptic "Christmas in Kinsale", in turn, merges with Yeats's and Cavafy's image of chaotic endings and frantic waiting: waiting for the 'new blood'. Paraphrasing Yeats's "Second Coming," Mahon depicts "the young... slouching into Bethlehem" in the spurt of a pseudo-spiritual New Age tourism, urged to various sacred mountains by the desire to watch the advance of the new millennium, "the *aíslíng* and the dreamt apocalypse", though "the oracles are dumb" in this world dominated by technological progress and ecological disaster. Meditating in the Yeatsian vein: "Does history, exhausted, come full circle?" Mahon eventually heralds a revival: "A cock crowing good-morning... like a peacock... in Byzantium,/... life begins." Being "a waste theorist"⁷⁰ (the

68. Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, p. 62.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

70. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

opinion Haughton elaborates on in an excellent article⁷¹), Mahon recycles rubbish to produce a new beginning. At this exact point, *The Yellow Book* closes with a dream vision of... the Cyclades.

I dreamed last night of a blue Cycladic dawn,
a lone figure pointing to the horizon,
again the white islands shouting, 'Come on; come on!...

This ending discloses Mahon the spiritual traveller. The lucidity of the Cycladic landscape, which he once compared to the Irish islescape in the poem "Achill"⁷², counterbalances the increasing disorder of the contemporary world. Indeed, it counterbalances the apocalypse. In this reunion with nature, mnemonic, imaginary and subconscious, Mahon meets his own self in the "lone figure pointing to the horizon" on the oneiric island. As I have already observed⁷³, his homecoming to the place situated abroad epitomises his journey into the inner world, the only territory remaining private in the contemporary world; "the more public the lifeworld realm, the greater the pull towards the inner self", Theano Terkenli remarks in her essay "Home as a Region"⁷⁴. Hugh Haughton spotted in Mahon's archival notebook a list from the *Private Eye* magazine which in my opinion must have provided a structural design for "Christmas in Kinsale": "litter, waste, junk, ephemera, collecting, recycling, antiquarianism, fetishism, museums, the home, memorabilia, memory, mess, disorder, space and freedom"⁷⁵. Applied to Mahon's poem, the list clearly reveals the position of the Cycladic dawn as the one of "space and freedom". The Cyclades in "Christmas in Kinsale" represent a *carte blanche*, an unwritten space simultaneously loaded with potential meanings, a geographical region retrieved from Mahon's sentimental map and forming a mental and spiritual zone of his private myth. Emphasised by the open ending of the poem (three dots), this unbounded space – a traveller's ideal of an unexplored territory – constitutes Mahon's response to the age of organised tourism.

Greece – and more specifically his travels, mainly to Paros, in 1974-1997 – has provided the poet with a paradigm of authenticity and liberation which seems lost on the era of *homo turisticus*. It must be added here that the Greek islands in "Christmas in Kinsale", rather than with antiquity "where Greek sculpture

71. Hugh Haughton, "'The bright garbage on the incoming wave': Rubbish in the Poetry of Derek Mahon", *Textual Practice*, Vol. 16 No. 1, 2002, p. 323-343.

72. Derek Mahon, *Antarctica*, Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1985.

73. Cf. my article "The (Im)palpable: Two Cycladic Landscapes by Derek Mahon and Michael Longley", which discusses "Christmas in Kinsale" from the ecocritical perspective; *Landscapes*, Vol. 17 No. 2, 2016, p. 3-22.

74. Theano S. Terkenli, "Home as a Region", *Geographical Review*, Vol. 85 No. 3, Jul 1995, p. 324-334; p. 333.

75. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

was established” as some critics observed about this poem⁷⁶, should be associated with the contemporary model of human relationships and of interaction between humans and nature (though indeed “Greek sculpture was established” on Paros and the Cycladic landscape and architecture can be read in terms of form, “the beautiful and the sublime⁷⁷”). The “white islands” of the Greek archipelago in “Christmas in Kinsale” are akin to Mahon’s “Irish vistas of sea and seashore as tokens of metaphysical perspectives” but they do not “invoke ultimate states of post-history, post-existence⁷⁸”. For, contrary to Longley and Heaney, as he traveled in Greece, Mahon was more interested in modernity and prehistory than in the classical heritage and post-existence⁷⁹.

Ensuing from this examination of Mahon’s poems is a hesitant though mostly negative attitude to the phenomenon of tourism. Oscillating between the positions of a traveller, an armchair traveller, an anti-tourist, a mock tourist and a post-tourist, the author meditates on (fake) spiritual tourism, consumerism, post-colonial heritage, mythology, pollution by tourism, and many other issues related to domestic and foreign spaces. Exactly this differentiation between the domestic and foreign space is also responsible for his shifting attitude: quite naturally, in Ireland he tends to assume an anti-tourist view, while in Greece, for instance, he juggles the roles of a mock tourist, a post-tourist and a traveller. The confines of these positions are never clear-cut, however, as they interact with the poet’s turbulent relationship with home, his sense of (self-)exile, and his spiritual affinity with the Cycladic landscape.

His pejorative approach to tourism is not alienated; as Buzard notes at the very beginning of his book, “most English speakers also recognize a distinct negative connotation for ‘tourist’⁸⁰”. The tenets of *The Yellow Book* can be acutely summed up with a quote from Buzard: Mahon’s volume represents one of the instances suggestive of “the tourist’s peculiar place in modern representations of... the possible decline of civilization, or of the processes of true and false (‘touristic’) perception⁸¹”. Bearing in mind this vaster frame of reference it becomes evident that, although tourism is one of the numerous themes discussed *The Yellow Book*, Mahon’s contribution to this philosophical and historiosophic reflection cannot be overrated.

76. Jefferson Holdridge, “Night-Rule: Decadence and Sublimity in Derek Mahon from *The Yellow Book* to the ‘Italian Poems’”, *Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 17, 2002, p. 50-69; quote: p. 63.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Terence Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 135. I have also compared Irish and Greek seascapes in “Derek Mahon’s Seascapes”.

79. For more details see my *Irish Poets and Modern Greece*.

80. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 2.