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Abstract: Derek Mahon's poetical œuvre can be read as a critical reflection on man's relation to Earth. This paper first examines how the basic elements of familiar landscapes (land, soil, earth, sea) interact, thus defining a poetic territory viewed from the *sea* as the prime element to which one inevitably returns. Then the poet's ecological perspective is re-interpreted in wider geopoetic terms. Thirdly an analysis highlighting the vulnerability of an endangered earth yet able to draw out of its depths the energy to ceaselessly renew itself is carried out, focusing on the topos of the beach as a no man's land of indeterminacy through which renewal is made possible and "rejectamenta" may access new horizons.

Keywords: Derek Mahon, Earth, sea, beach, geopoetics.

Résumé: L'œuvre de Derek Mahon peut se lire comme une réflexion critique sur la relation de l'homme à la Terre. Cet article analysera d'abord comment les éléments constitutifs des paysages (la terre, le sol, la mer) interagissent pour former un territoire perçu à partir de la mer, cet élément premier vers lequel chacun revient inévitablement. Puis, la perspective écologique du poète est examinée à la lumière de la géopoétique. Enfin, l'analyse mettra en lumière la vulnérabilité d'une terre menacée, néanmoins capable de puiser dans ses profondeurs l'énergie de se renouveler sans cesse. On insistera sur le topos de la plage, cet espace liminal aux contours indécis, à travers lequel un renouveau est possible et nos « rejectamenta » se voient ouvrir de nouveaux horizons.

Mots clés: Derek Mahon, Terre, mer, plage, géopoétique.

Most of us sense that the Earth is more than a sphere of rock with a thin layer of air, ocean and life covering the surface. We feel that we belong here as if this planet were indeed our home. Long ago the Greeks, thinking this way, gave to the Earth the name *Gaia* or, for short, *Ge*. In those days, science and theology were one and science, although less precise, had soul. James Lovelock, "What is Gaia?"¹

Introduction

Prior to the rapid changes of the Celtic Tiger years, Derek Mahon's poetry was haunted both by dereliction and renewal as described in poems like "Thammuz" (first

1. James Lovelock, "What is Gaia?", in *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems*, Neil Astley (ed.), Tarsnet, Bloodaxe Books, 2007, p. 12.

published in 1975) or, in an altogether different register, “A Garage in Co. Cork” (first published in 1982)². Those were the years when environmental issues started to come to the fore in Ireland. However, it took some time before the poet developed what may be called an ecopoetic or geopoetic sensitivity which gradually became more prominent in the works he published from the mid-2000s, from *Harbour Lights* (2005) to *Rising Late* (2017)³. That this awareness of ecological issues in Mahon’s poetical works may be indebted to the fin-de-siècle and early 21st-century *Zeitgeist* or, presumably, to the poet’s deeper personal preoccupation with the future of the planet only reveals the poet’s acute sense of the power of artistic imagination and production in highlighting the scope of the changes and “cycles of doom and gloom”⁴ that affect the life of our planet.

Moreover, and interestingly enough, his attention has always been turned to the sea so that when it comes to ecology Mahon does not seem to be especially preoccupied with the issue of the *land*, or of the *soil*, and especially of the *Irish soil*. His ecological preoccupations lie rather with the *earth*, or *Earth* (as *Ge* or *Gaia*, as a global force capable of renewing itself by itself), and in particular with the *beach*, which is a go-between, between land and sea, a no-one’s land, so to speak, that does not belong to anyone since it is continually covered and recovered by the sea. The beach belongs to the sea and the sea decides whether to engulf it, or, more rarely, to abandon it and let the land reclaim it, as has recently been the case on Achill Island where two beaches have miraculously reappeared⁵.

Given this, two issues in particular need to be addressed: firstly, how do *land*, (*Irish*) *soil*, *earth* and *sea*, as reality, poetic material and metaphors, interact in Mahon’s poetry, thus fashioning a multifaceted approach to these notions, from the poet’s distrust towards any mercenary utilization of the Irish landscape to a more universal or *global* vision of man’s relationship to earth; secondly, how the *beach*, this fluctuating liminal space cornered between two natural borders, the land, on the one side – the *shore* –, and the ocean or the sea on the other side, becomes a space full of creative possibilities, with its sand, pebbles, rocks and toys, in summary the rubbish left by the tide on the sand.

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2. Derek Mahon, “Thammuz”, *Lines Review*, no. 52/53, 1975, reprinted in *The Snow Party*, London – New York, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 11, subsequently “The Golden Bough”, in *Poems 1962-1978*, Oxford – New York – Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 66; “A Garage in Co. Cork”, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 1982 and *Irish Press*, 21 August 1982, reprinted in every single volume of selected and collected poems published afterwards (see *New Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2011, p. 121, and *New Selected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 2016, p. 48).
 3. Derek Mahon’s latest collection, *Against the Clock*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, came out in September 2018.
 4. We borrow the expression from Marie Mianowski: “Writing the Stories of the Celtic Tiger: An Interview with Literature Scholar Marie Mianowski”, *Working Notes*, vol. 31, no. 82, 2018, p. 27.
 5. Achill Island, Co. Mayo, is situated off the west coast of Ireland and, indeed, in March 2017, the beach at Dooagh reappeared, after more than thirty years (in 1984 the sand had been washed away by storms, leaving only rocks and rock pools), and in November 2017, a second beach also reappeared in Ashleam Bay on Achill, after vanishing twelve years before.

Land, soil, earth and sea: some linguistic comments

In the first place, it can probably be ascertained that any preoccupation with “Irishness” as a marker of identity bears no affinity with Mahon’s poetry even though a non-Irish reader would recognize the backdrop, situations and tradition in which it is set as, somehow, Irish. However, it is not “Irish” in a local – or narrowly parochial – sense and the poet’s relation to nature is pensive, concerned, and sensitive. There is a universal dimension in Mahon’s poetry which precludes any narrow interpretation of it in terms of “Irishness”. The following extract illustrates both the universal scope of this poetry and the poet’s sense of active contemplation and belonging:

- (1) Above rising crops
 the sun peeps like an eclipse
 in a snow of hawthorn, and a breeze sings
 its simple pleasure in the nature of things,
 a tinkling ditch and a long field
 where tractors growled.
- Second by second
 cloud swirls on the globe as though
 political; lilacs listen to the wind,
 watching birds circle in the yellow glow
 of a spring day, in a sea stench
 of kelp and trench.
- Are we going to laugh
 on the road as if the whole
 show was set out for our grand synthesis?
 Abandoned trailers sunk in leaves and turf,
 slow erosion, waves on the boil...
 We belong to this –
- not as discrete
 observing presences but as born
 participants in the action, sharing of course
 “the seminal substance of the universe”⁶
 with hedgerow, flower and thorn,
 rook, rabbit and rat [...] ⁷.

6. This quote is recycled from Aidan Higgins’ novel *Balcony of Europe*, Neil Murphy (ed.), Champaign, Dalkey Archive Press, 2010 (see Derek Mahon, “Life as Story Told”, in *Selected Prose*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2012, p. 199).

7. Derek Mahon, “A Country Road”, in *New Collected Poems*, p. 309. Most of the excerpts quoted are from *New Collected Poems* (henceforth *NCP*) and *Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999 (henceforth *CP*).

"It might be anywhere"⁸, and it might "synthesize" several locations all at once. This extract is fairly representative of the poet's vision of an involvement in his surroundings and shows that the poet does not focus on *ø* land or *a* land or *the* land as denoting a specific country, or on *ø* soil as referring to the ground one treads or cultivates. He does not focus either on *ø* territory as a bordered identified area. Instead the poem describes a live landscape of hedgerow, ditch, field, hawthorn and lilacs, birds, rook, rabbit and rat at springtime. In these lines, the notions⁹ of /land/, /soil/ and /territory/ are *indirectly* evoked through the components of a country road landscape including cultivated land, wild hedgerows, clouds and wind, fauna and flora. Besides, the country road described is not far from the sea whose distinct smell fills the air: "sea stench / of kelp and trench".

As if to confirm this indirectness, the number of occurrences of the words *land* and *soil* in the whole of *New Collected Poems* (2011) is surprisingly low: there are about ten to fifteen occurrences of *land* including compounds, only two or three occurrences of *soil*. In contrast, the words *earth* (thirty to forty occurrences) and, in particular, *sea*, are conspicuous in the whole of the poetry: nearly half of the 212 poems collected in *NCP* contain one or several occurrences of the word *sea* either as a single lexical item and/or a *sea*-compound¹⁰. The poems describe a seascape, have the sea as a background setting, or reflect on the relation between man and his familiar environment through the perception of an enunciator-poet who once wrote "But how could we / survive indefinitely / so far from the city and the sea?"¹¹. The linguistic context of these occurrences shows that the notions themselves do not make sense as individual concepts but in relation to one another, as can be observed in the extracts below:

- (2) Far from **land**, far from the trade routes,
 In an unbroken dream-time
 Of penguin and whale
 The **seas** sigh to themselves
 Reliving the days before the days of sail¹².

8. Derek Mahon, "A Lighthouse in Maine", in *NCP*, p. 299.

9. Notions are "complex systems of physico-cultural properties"; "In the *lexical domain*: one must think in terms of a semantic field around a root, a set of representations varying according to the language. [...] Words are a kind of *summary* of these notional systems of representation. They are collectors: with a word, one can refer to a notion. It evokes all the notion, but the relationship is not symmetrical: a notion will only be partially contained in a word" (Antoine Culioli, *Cognition and Representation in Linguistic Theory*, Michel Liddle (ed.), John T. Stonham (trans.), Amsterdam – Philadelphia, J. Benjamins, 1995, p. 34-35).

10. The numbers of occurrences are not absolutely accurate, resulting from a manual count after reading over the poems. Mahon's corpus of poems has not been digitalized and cannot be explored electronically. We have counted around 125 occurrences of the word *sea*, including compounds (with *sea* as a qualifier as in *sea music*, *sea-chest*, *sea-thrift*, and so on).

11. Derek Mahon, "The Woods", in *NCP*, p. 124.

12. Derek Mahon, "The Banished Gods", in *NCP*, p. 77.

- (3) Up there where silence falls
and there is no more **land**
your scared, scary voice calls
to the great waste beyond¹³.
- (4) [...]. An astonishing six inches
fell in a single night from inky cloud.
Not much distinction now between **sea and land**:
some sat in dinghies rowing where they'd sown,
navigating their own depth-refracted ground
and scaring salmon from among the branches.
Global warming, of course, but more like war
as if dam-busting bombers had been here [...] ¹⁴.

In these three extracts, the absence of determiner can be analyzed as the trace of an operation constructing a reference to the notional domain of /land/ as “a complex system of physico-cultural properties”¹⁵, in contrast with another one, which it is not: land is not sea (and vice versa); land is not “the great waste beyond” either, and even when the material difference or limit between them has been effaced by some exceptional meteorological event as described in (4), the language still makes the difference: “Not much distinction now *between sea and land*” (our emphasis). Imagination mixes the two in an unnamed “scape”, neither landscape nor seascape, but flooded ground (water and earth mingling together). Moreover, the very discontinuities of the landscape – “the trade routes”, “the seas” (2), “hinterland” (5), an “island” (6) and (8), “the sandy soil” and “the ocean rim” (7), “meadows” and “strand” (8) – define a territory which is, most of the time, viewed from the sea:

- (5) We might be anywhere but are in one place only,
One of the milestone of Earth residence
Unique in each particular, the thinly
Peopled **hinterland** serenely tense –
But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature¹⁶.
- (6) The whole **island** a sanctuary where amazed
Oneiric species whistle and chatter
Evacuating rock-faces and cliff-top¹⁷.
- (7) It [the cup of the coconut] rots in **sandy soil**
here at **the ocean rim**,

13. Derek Mahon, “Homage to Gaia”, in *NCP*, p. 322.

14. Derek Mahon, “After the Storm”, in *NCP*, p. 344.

15. See footnote 9.

16. Derek Mahon, “A Garage in Co. Cork”, p. 122.

17. Derek Mahon, “Rathlin”, in *NCP*, p. 98.

changing to coal and oil
through geological time¹⁸.

- (8) As promised, the Corfu crew put him [Ulysses] ashore
at dawn, still dozing, where the *sea's* roar
turned in his ears, and so he woke at last
on *his own soil*. Athene threw a sea mist
over the rocks, and after many a year
he didn't know *his native earth* at first.
'Oh, not *another island!*', he complained.
'Whose *meadows* are those above the *strand?*'¹⁹

The two occurrences of *soil* in (7) and (8) are both qualified. In (7), besides the need for a rhyme (*soil* / *oil*), the qualification *sandy* draws the reader's attention to the processes of erosion that transform some substance into another one, itself the repository for a biological process of transmutation of a plant into combustible matter, coal or oil, through "geological time". Thus every substance is connected through metamorphosis (*sand* and *soil*, *coal* and *oil*). The second occurrence in (8) is located in relation to *him* [Ulysses] via the determiner *his*, thus marking a close relationship between locator and located element. Two lines of verse later, "*his own soil*" becomes "*his native earth*", then "*another island*" before he "knows" his own island. The *island* as a finite territory is emblematic of the whole earth itself, mother of all living things and humans, encompassing land and sea: "It boasts fine pasture for cows and goats, / oak, pine and boatyards. It's not vast, as you will see, but rich in crops and wine / and generously fed with dew and rain"²⁰. In this respect the notion /*earth*/ ²¹ is most significant since it conveys the idea of a "reality" which is spiritual and material all at once, spectacle and interplay between order and chaos. A network of semantic threads are interlaced to form not just a pattern but a fabric subsumed under the notion /*earth*/ with land and sea both juxtaposed and joined by a liminal strand, with soil, sand, and rock(s) as testimony to a perennial process of disintegration, oblivion, and regeneration through transformation.

However, of *land* and *sea* – hence *earth* and *water* – the latter notion has come to predominate over the first one: "Driftwood and cloud castle, / expiring lines of froth, / absorbing sand where every / worm-hole is a discovery: / two worlds, earth and air; water, the best of both"²², and this feature opens new reading perspectives of the poet's work.

18. Derek Mahon, "Homage to Gaia", p. 325.

19. Derek Mahon, "Ithaca", in *NCP*, p. 329.

20. *Ibid.*

21. The notional domain of /*earth*/ is "summarized" by the recurrent word *earth* and its compounds (approximately forty to fifty occurrences) and all the lexical items belonging to the semantic field it represents.

22. Derek Mahon, "Sand Studies", in *NCP*, p. 270.

New critical perspectives: geopoetic horizons

Hugh Haughton, commenting on *Harbour Lights* (2005), describes how the collection represents:

[...] a new wave in Mahon's work, showing him at the height of his powers [...] inspired by a sense of biological and ecological force, planetary and marine music, that makes him one of the most fully energized "green" poets of the age²³.

Influenced by the poetic approach to the earth as an endangered planet developed by scientist Rachel Carson²⁴ and, more recently, by his reading of Michael Thompson's 1979 ground-breaking study, *Rubbish Theory*, and of British scientist James Lovelock's autobiography, *Homage to Gaia*²⁵, Mahon may be labelled as a "green poet". However, it can be argued that this is somehow reductive. Mahon is no activist but rather a recorder of "life on earth", a poet-artist who draws the line between politics and aesthetics, a poet-philosopher acutely aware of time, geological time, history time and life time (in other words, cosmological, chronological, and psychological time), with past and future indefinitely fused as in a Möbius strip. Most of his poetry, in many ways, is a kind of "*ruminatio inconclusive*"²⁶:

You always knew it would come down
to a dozy seaside town –

not really in the country, no,
but within reach of the countryside,
somewhere alive to season, wind and tide,
far field and wind farm. [...]
[...]

Gaia demands your love, the patient earth
your airy sneakers tread expect
humility and care.

It's time now to go back at last
beyond irony and slick depreciation,
Past hedge and fencing to a clearer vision,
time to create a future from the past,
tune out the babbling radio waves
and listen to the leaves²⁷.

23. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 317.

24. Rachel Carson is the author of *Under the Sea-Wind* [1941], which celebrates the open sea (London, Penguin Classics, 2007) and *Silent Spring* [1962], which alerted the world to the dangers of pesticides (London, Penguin Classics, 2000).

25. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* [1979], London, Pluto Press, 2017; James Lovelock, *Homage to Gaia: The Life of an Independent Scientist* [2000], London, Souvenir Press, 2014.

26. Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, t. I, *L'intrigue et le récit historique*, Paris, Seuil (Points Essais), 1983, p. 24.

27. Derek Mahon, "A Quiet Spot", in *NCP*, p. 333.

Alongside this meditation on time, his exploration of the world has come to concentrate on open spaces and the uncertain limits of land and water:

A straight line, wherever the edge may be,
 confines and also opens up the sea
 to ancient shipwreck, drowned forest,
 lost continents and nuclear waste.
 You hear a different music of the spheres
 depending where you stand on these quiet shores²⁸.

From a critical standpoint, Mahon's work can be studied from various angles involving point of view, frame and horizon (a painter's stance), and rootedness in a particular spot ("We belong to this" (*cf.* (1)). This last perspective, which is not exclusive of the other two, suits the more recent poems which result from the elaborate construction of a link between text (reading and writing) and phenomena, phenomena and imagined text, in a to-and-fro movement. The anchoring point – the viewer as "origin of perception" – is mobile and the construction or, in Mahon's words, the "form of words", follows the lines of a landscape turned into an act of reading and writing:

*Saisir les infimes modifications de son environnement naturel ou urbain et manipuler selon les cas des idées, des mots, des cartes, des savoirs, des artefacts, des images, etc.: voilà ce qui est au cœur de l'aventure poétique*²⁹.

As has been mentioned, the poet's poetical exploration of the earth and its landscapes is indebted to scientific accounts of biodiversity (Carson and Lovelock) and to social studies (Thompson) but also to other literary works³⁰. It has gradually, poem after poem, come to focus on water, on the sea and its fringes, and outermost bounds where water and earth meet:

*Là où la végétation prolifère de manière fulgurante, là où le rythme de l'eau anime le paysage, là où le minéral impose ses lois, là où le vent souffle à perdre haleine, là où les "phénomènes premiers" retiennent toute l'attention, les confins apparaissent. C'est leur saisie qui déclenche l'écriture*³¹.

In Mahon's poetry, Nature cannot be approached otherwise than through strolling, wandering, walking, but most crucially through human experiences; and in this respect, the shore and beaches of Kinsale provide him with a new perspective, as Agnès Derail-Imbert notes: "une autre manière d'enquêter sur la 'culture humaine'"³².

28. Derek Mahon, "Horizons", in *Rising Late*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2017, unpaginated.

29. Rachel Bouvet, Rita Olivieri-Godet, "Introduction", in *Géopoétique des confins*, Rachel Bouvet, Rita Olivieri-Godet (eds.), Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018, p. 24.

30. Let us only mention here Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817, 1847 for a second edition).

31. Rachel Bouvet, Rita Olivieri-Godet, "Introduction", p. 7.

32. Agnès Derail-Imbert, "La philosophie à la plage", *Études anglaises*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2006, p. 305. Mahon's essay, "Rubbish Theory", is a fine example of his reflections on "the culture of waste", in *Olympia and the Internet*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2017.

The beach from an ecological perspective

Still, we may wonder why Mahon has chosen to focus his poetic attention on *the beach* (and inevitably on *the sea*) in particular, and especially from an ecological perspective. He has always been strongly attracted to the sea, which runs in the family, as his male relatives all worked in the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast or in the merchant navy. He called one of his uncles, a sailor, “extraordinarily romantic because he had left Belfast”³³ and the appeal of his uncle’s seafaring life is evoked in an early poem, “My Wicked Uncle”³⁴. Mahon himself wanted to be a sailor, as he recalls in an interview in 1999:

All the men in the family were concentrated on ships and the sea... I wanted to go to sea myself so I was taken down to the Custom House in Belfast when I was about sixteen, and given a preliminary examination, which involved looking at a chart on the wall. You know: O, X, Z, Q. The doctor said, ‘Read off the chart on the wall’. So I said: ‘What chart?’ And that was the end of my seafaring career³⁵.

This episode crops up again in a poem entitled “A Curious Ghost”, in which he says “I failed the eyesight test / When I tried for the Merchant Navy / And lapsed into this lyric lunacy”³⁶, and evokes the ghost of his father-in-law, “a sea captain who died at sea, almost”³⁷. When his father-in-law died, “They found unfinished poems in your sea-chest [his uncle’s]”³⁸: to Mahon, the sea is an “*invitation au voyage*”, to use Baudelaire’s words, but also an invitation to poetry, to this “lyric lunacy” he has lapsed into.

Very early on in Mahon’s poetry, the beach is the place of *dejecta*, where objects discarded by men have been marooned, stranded by the sea and shipwrecks, as in “North Sea” (1979):

The terminal light of beaches,
pebbles speckled with oil;
old tins at the tide-line
where a gull blinks on a pole³⁹.

The pebbles soiled with oil, the old tins stranded where the tide has left them are mute witnesses of human pollution, as well as the tins in one of Mahon’s most influential poems, “The Apotheosis of Tins” (1975), where the tins awake on the beach, surrounded with detritus and *disjecta*:

33. Derek Mahon interview in *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement*, James P. Myers (ed.), Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1999, p. 187.

34. Derek Mahon, “My Wicked Uncle”, in *Night-Crossing*, London – New York – Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 8.

35. Derek Mahon interview, in *Writing Irish...*, p. 187.

36. Derek Mahon, “A Curious Ghost”, in *CP*, p. 62.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. Derek Mahon, “North Sea”, in *Poems 1962-1978*, p. 92.

Having spent the night in a sewer of precognition
 consoled in moon-glow, air-chuckle
 and the retarded pathos of mackerel,
 we wake among shoelaces and white wood
 to a raw wind and the cries of gulls.

[...]

This is the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab,
 of wine and Windolene; it is always rush-hour⁴⁰.

In both poems we may notice the use of the same adjective *terminal*: “the *terminal* light of beaches” and “the *terminal* democracy of hatbox and crab” (our emphasis). In both cases, “terminal” refers to the fact that this disposal of daily consumer objects is final, irretrievable. “Terminal” also suggests the notion of *ending*, like the full stop of a sentence, as if the society of men had to end there, on a beach, the only survivors being tins, shoelaces, white wood, wine bottles and glass cleaning products such as *Windolene*, almost all of these objects being non-recyclable. This final or “terminal” stage of a society where only waste remains is a leitmotiv in Mahon’s poems, and this even in his early poems, where his discourse is mainly eschatological, with poems such as “Entropy”⁴¹, “What Will Remain”⁴², “An Image from Beckett”⁴³ or also “A Stone Age Figure Far Below”⁴⁴. Thus Mahon’s poems from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s are impregnated with the fear of catastrophe or even apocalypse, whether ecological or historical, as reflected by the publication of two major works at the time, echoing the fears of the *Zeitgeist*, such as *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), and *The Sense of an Ending* by Frank Kermode (1968) which retraces the eschatological paradigm in literature. As Haughton remarks, Mahon’s poetry echoes the concerns of Carson and Kermode, but also those due to the historical events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Cuba crisis, the Vietnam War, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the awareness of the Holocaust, the “increasingly vocal ecological debate about the effect of industrialization and the survival of the planet”⁴⁵, as well as the crisis in Northern Ireland.

However, in Mahon’s poems the beach stands out also as a place of *redemption*, after the sea’s *retribution*. Indeed, we may observe in his work a two-fold process of justice (if not of a divine order, then of a natural one), where nature punishes the *hybris* of men by killing them during a natural catastrophe, such as a tsunami, and then by discarding their personal belongings into the sea, after which they are then stranded on beaches. In Mahon’s poem “After the Titanic”, for instance, the former president of the White Star Line, Bruce Ismay, who survived the shipwreck of the Titanic owned by his company, relates his shameful fate:

40. Derek Mahon, “The Apotheosis of Tins”, in *CP*, p. 69.

41. Derek Mahon, “Entropy”, in *Poems 1962-1978*, p. 49.

42. Derek Mahon, “What Will Remain”, in *Lives*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 26.

43. Derek Mahon, “An Image from Beckett”, in *CP*, p. 40.

44. Derek Mahon, “A Stone Age Figure Far Below”, in *CP*, p. 42.

45. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 93.

They said I got away in a boat
 And humbled me at the inquiry. I tell you
 I sank as far that night as any
 Hero. As I sat shivering on the dark water
 I turned to ice to hear my costly
 Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of
 Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches,
 Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime. Now I hide
 In a lonely house behind the sea
 Where the tide leaves broken toys and hatboxes
 Silently at my door⁴⁶.

The world of luxury collapses (“[...] my costly/Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of/Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches,/ Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime”), and to the poet the shipwreck of the Titanic almost embodies a process of purification, such as the Flood in the Bible. Through this purifying process, objects of consumer society are engulfed by the ocean and their remains are scattered on the beach near Ismay’s home in Casla (“Costelloe” in English), a small village in Connemara, where he had chosen to live a secluded life. The “broken toys and hatboxes” resurface to haunt him and to remind him of his shameful past (“Silently at my door”), but they have undergone the purifying and deforming force of Nature (“broken”). Once more, the beach is the place where everything ends, where all objects, all vanities, *vanitas vanitatum*, are levelled by the power of the sea, which reinforces the almost political and economic notion of the beach as *a new democracy*, which will outlive what the geologists have now called “the Anthropocene”: the future of mankind will be “the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab”.

This scenario, where the storm wrecks human artefacts and leaves them abandoned on the beach or on another *tabula rasa*, is recurrent throughout Mahon’s *œuvre*, and may be found again in poems such as “The Great Wave” or “After the Storm”. “The Great Wave”, published in 2010 in *An Autumn Wind*, refers to the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, and depicts how “the swirling mud receded leaving a waste / of bodies, furniture, palm trunks, dereliction / and in the streets the contents of an ocean”⁴⁷. The description by the poet of this “waste” left by the ocean corresponds to what Lena M. Lencek, in her essay entitled “The Beach as Ruin”, calls “the chronic deposits of catastrophe”:

Of all the stuff that washes up on beaches, the manmade strata are the most telling as inventories of the values and priorities of the cultures that produced them [...]. The wreckage left behind in the wake of the tsunami of January 2005 stands as a testament to the First World’s insatiable appetite for leisure in Third World tourists resorts. In the same year, on the opposite side of the globe, Hurricane Katrina ploughed through the

46. Derek Mahon, “After the Titanic”, in *CP*, p. 30.

47. Derek Mahon, “The Great Wave”, in *An Autumn Wind*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2010, p. 77.

Gulf Coast and the Mississippi River basin, leaving behind a landscape of broken power grids, oil rigs, and ruptured chemical depots in a wash of shingles, cars and corpses. The chronic deposits of catastrophe, man-made or natural, stand as massive “vanitas” installations, reminding us that in the face of time and nature, all that is human is transitory and ephemeral⁴⁸.

The hurricane, or the tsunami, act as eye-openers or metaphysical reminders that all that is human is “transitory and ephemeral”, including “manmade strata”, as “inventories of the values and priorities of the cultures that produce[s] them”. In another poem, “After the Storm”, the same pattern of storm and purification by the natural elements is repeated, following a storm in Co. Cork, not far from where Mahon lives, in Kinsale:

Detritus of the years, carpet and car,
computers and a wide range of expensive
gadgetry went spinning down the river
with furniture and linen, crockery, shoes
and clothes, until it finally gave over;
not everyone had full insurance cover⁴⁹.

The storm displaces what belonged inside the home (“carpet and car, / computers and a wide range of expensive / gadgetry”, but also “furniture and linen, crockery, shoes / and clothes”), transforming personal appliances and belongings into waste, thus exposing them as unwanted *rubbish*. This exposure of rubbish is precisely what may disturb the eye of the *flâneur*, when taking a stroll near the River Lee for instance, or on the beach, as Thompson in his previously mentioned essay, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, emphasizes: “Something which has been discarded, but never threatens to intrude, does not worry us at all. But rubbish in the wrong place is emphatically visible and extremely embarrassing”⁵⁰. There is anger in Mahon’s *ecopoetic* poems, which may also be felt in his own recent essay entitled “Rubbish Theory”, after Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory*. In this essay, Mahon reminds the reader in an outraged tone of the existence of “a sea of rubbish, hundreds of miles wide, in the Pacific”⁵¹, and expresses his concern about “*unsalvageable* junk”:

What concerns me here is the evidently *unsalvageable* junk, the forlorn things with no hope of ever being antiques or even relics of contemporary material culture: not the old toys and utensils but the organic stuff, the rags and bones destined for toxic incineration or for tips hazy with methane and loud with screaming gulls⁵².

48. Lena M. Lencek, “The Beach as Ruin”, in Andrew Hughes, David Carson, *Dominant Wave Theory*, London, Booth-Clibborn, 2006, p. 145.

49. Derek Mahon, “After the Storm”, p. 344-345.

50. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, p. 92.

51. Derek Mahon, “Rubbish Theory”, p. 22.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The term *unsalvageable* is quite meaningful in this context, as it may help us define Mahon's poetic and metaphysical quest, that is to say how to select, "salvage" and recycle what may be "salvaged" in terms of poetic interest, which very often goes against the economic and commercial values of consumer society. Hence the fundamental role of the sea as the eternal provider of objects/subjects of poetical value for the poet, as T. S. Eliot in the section entitled "The Dry Salvages"⁵³ of the *Four Quartets* reasserts:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge, also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men⁵⁴.

In Eliot's poem, the sea ceaselessly brings to the poet natural and artificial elements worthy of being "salvaged" (the first meaning of "salvage" refers to the fact of saving a ship or its cargo from perils of the sea), which are "*hints of earlier and other creation*", whether natural such as "the starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone" or man-made, such as "the *torn seine*⁵⁵, / The *shattered* lobsterpot, the *broken oar* / And the gear of foreign dead men". Contrary to natural objects, man-made artefacts arrive on the beach "torn", "shattered" or "broken", as they have been unable to resist the destructive power of the sea.

The role of the beach in poetry

What then is the role of the beach in poetry? The beach appears as a *palette* in the artistic sense of the term, or a canvas where elements of a different nature and order have been unwittingly prepared, so to speak, for the poet's hand to salvage and collect, such as Mahon does in his poems, following in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors, such as Thoreau in *Cape Cod* (1865). In this work, Thoreau assembles the account of three excursions he made in 1849, 1850 and 1855 to Cape Cod, and the first chapter, entitled "The Shipwreck", opens with

53. A prefatory note says: "The Dry Salvages – presumably *les trois sauvages* – is a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N. E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts [...]" (T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 205).

54. T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages", in *Four Quartets* [1943], London, Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 23.

55. A fishing net that hangs vertically in the water, having floats at the upper edge and sinkers at the lower.

the description of the relics left by the wreckage of ships on the beach, and in particular the wreckage of an Irish ship, the *St. John*, bound for America during the Great Famine in Ireland. The families and the relatives, who have come from Boston, look for familiar faces among the bodies of the victims, whereas Thoreau methodically explores the beach with the tip of his umbrella, looking for curiosities among the discarded objects and bodies:

The brig *St. John*, from Galway, Ireland, laden with emigrants, was wrecked on Sunday morning; it was now Tuesday morning, and the sea was still breaking violently on the rocks. [...] I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl, – who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family –, to which rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless, – merely red and white, – with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights [...] ⁵⁶.

There is no empathy in Thoreau's gaze, as he coldly describes the body of the drowned girl as if she were a mere fish, and he prefers to focus his attention on the rubbish left by the wreckage on the beach and on the wreck of the ship itself:

It appeared to us that there was enough rubbish to make the wreck of a large vessel in this cove alone, and that it would take many days to cart it off. It was several feet deep, and here and there was a bonnet or a jacket on it ⁵⁷.

In her article entitled “La philosophie à la plage”, Agnès Deraill-Imbert distinguishes between the “wrecker” and the “writer”:

Le wrecker, comme l'indique la forme déverbative du substantif anglais, c'est celui qui “fait” l'épave, en la sélectionnant, en se l'appropriant. Et tandis qu'il s'affaire à brouetter l'algue, la séparant des chairs inutiles, il échoit au scripteur (writer) de recueillir dans le livre les restes humains pour faire de cette ruine son œuvre ⁵⁸.

In a way the poet or the intellectual is *both* wrecker and writer, as he recovers salvage from the wrecked vessels *and* collects them in his narrative or in his poem, in order to make a work of art out of this ruin. In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau describes the beach as the place where “the waste and wrecks of human art” ⁵⁹ are exhibited, as if in an art gallery where the exhibition is always temporary and renewed everyday, according to the will of the curator, that is to say the sea.

56. Henry David Thoreau, “The Shipwreck”, in *Cape Cod* [1865], New York, Library of America, 1985, p. 853.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 854.

58. Agnès Deraill-Imbert, “La philosophie à la plage”, p. 311.

59. Henry David Thoreau, “The Beach Again”, in *Cape Cod*, p. 929.

At the same time, the advantage of the beach, both for Thoreau and Mahon, lies in its impartiality: “*The sea-shore is a sort of neutral ground*, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world”⁶⁰, to use Thoreau’s words. Mahon, for instance, has always refused to take sides, so to speak, especially during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and right from the beginning preferred to evoke the conflict indirectly, through the carcasses of the “burnt-out/buses”⁶¹ lying on the streets. Therefore it is not surprising that the very *neutrality* of the beach particularly appealed to him, as a vantage point to contemplate the world without having to take sides, as the objects or *rejectionamenta* are naturally rejected on the sand by the tide, reclaimed by no one except by the poet. The beach constitutes the ideal playground for the poet, as he is able to collect and assemble the toys that interest him the most on the beach: tins, hatboxes, crockery... He even instrumentalizes the ecological perspective on rubbish and waste, as it allows him both to express his concern for Gaia, and also to poetically reclaim the discarded debris lying on the beach. The beach is also the place where renewal is made possible, as Lencek suggests in “The Beach as Ruin”:

The one, saving grace of these landscapes of devastation is the promise of decay and, following hard on its heels, renewal. For all its tragic toll on human lives and suffering, the spectacle of destroyed artefacts on the beach has had its inspiring, hopeful interface. The tsunami, the hurricane, the winter storm, after all, scrub clean the beaches on which Western entrepreneurs have spot welded clones of Western recreational modules [...] ⁶².

To Mahon the beach is a perpetual “building site”⁶³, where everything may always be transformed at any moment: “*The discarded stuff lives on though*; there is a dark energy there in the dustbins of history, of potential use in some future ecological dispensation”⁶⁴. As in Andy Hughes’ photographs of rubbish on the Cornwall beaches⁶⁵, there is unexpected beauty to be found in the rubbish lying on the beach, and resistance to the erosion of time, as in “The Apotheosis of Tins”: “We shall be with you while there are beaches”⁶⁶. The beach, supplied by the creative power of the sea, offers to what Baptiste Monsaingeon names the “*Homo detritus*”⁶⁷ (poets included), a whole range of possibilities, as Mahon reminds us of in one of his latest poems, “Rising Late”: “The vast sea-breath reminds us, even these days / as even more oil and junk slosh in the waves, / the future remains open to alternatives”⁶⁸.

60. Henry David Thoreau, “The Highland Light”, *ibid.*, p. 979 (our emphasis).

61. Derek Mahon, “Rage for Order”, in *CP*, p. 47.

62. Lena M. Lencek, “The Beach as Ruin”, p. 146.

63. The expression is borrowed from Derek Mahon’s poem, “A Building Site”, in *An Autumn Wind*, p. 37.

64. Derek Mahon, “Rubbish Theory”, p. 25 (our emphasis).

65. See Andy Hughes’ beautiful photographs of *disjecta* on the beaches in *Dominant Wave Theory*.

66. Derek Mahon, “The Apotheosis of Tins”, p. 69.

67. Baptiste Monsaingeon, *Homo detritus: critique de la société du déchet*, Paris, Seuil, 2017.

68. Derek Mahon, “Rising Late”, in *Rising Late*.

Conclusion

Any reader of Mahon's poems cannot but be struck by the omnipresence of the sea throughout the poetry. Over the years, the poet's attitude has evolved from a youthful romantic outlook on nature, land, and water to a more sophisticated understanding of the imprint of time and civilization on the landscapes, at home and abroad. His awareness of ecological stakes goes beyond a superficial concern for our environment and the sea enables him to look out, to embrace distant horizons, and to consider life in the light of constant renewal and regeneration. The drama staged on the beach, while it illustrates man's vanity and vulnerability, may also express the poet's realistic hope for a better future: "[...] life always finds // somewhere to whisper, thought a place to grow / [...]"⁶⁹. *Rejectamenta* are intrinsically poetic material whose numinous beauty can be converted into *words*. Thus the poet charts his individual relation to Earth through the poetic medium and through language. His earth is all at once frame (in the archaic or poetic sense of "the universe, or part of it, regarded as an embracing structure"⁷⁰), mother, and repository, best apprehended from the liminal space of the shore looking out to the unbounded expanse of the sea:

*Et nulle part mieux que sur le rivage, aux limites de la pensée, on peut toucher à l'inachèvement de ses projets. Là on vient voir comme inhabitable le lieu que pourtant on habite, là on vient voir ce qui nous revient, rejeté par la mer, comme ce qui nous regarde et pourtant nous est étranger*⁷¹.

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69. Derek Mahon, "Rising Late".

70. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 727.

71. Agnès Derail-Imbert, "La philosophie à la plage", p. 309. Our study is especially indebted to Agnès Derail-Imbert's inspiring article for our reflection on the beach in particular, and to Rachel Bouvet and Rita Olivieri-Godet's *Géopétique des confins* for our interpretation of the beach as a liminal space open to creative possibilities.