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“Undermine the system from within”: The Shifting Layers of Irony in the Poetry of Derek Mahon

Zhou Ying

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Zhou Ying

Zhou Ying is a PhD student of English literary studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her current research interests focus on Irish poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially the poetry of Derek Mahon and Michael Longley. She is also interested in the relation between language and poetic forms, and literary modernism; e-mail: y.zhou@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

This article centers around irony in the poems of a leading Irish poet, Derek Mahon (1941-2020), and discusses how the typical Mahonian irony can be seen as a creative and resilient response to ingrained sectarianism, political tensions, riots, and violence in the Irish and Northern Irish context to date. This article will particularly emphasize how the poet's use of presents the coexistence of mutually exclusive elements/perspectives/stances and opens up a path to honesty, subtlety, and artistic accuracy in chaotic social circumstances. This research also explores how the Mahonian irony offers a new way of negotiating identity, a word that highlights common nature and solidarity yet increasingly leads to controversy and separation in times of crisis. The employment of irony in Mahon's poems works to frustrate the singular view and ultimately resist fixity in an overheated cultural environment. The Mahonian irony blurs the boundaries of English/Irish, Catholic/Protestant, Unionist/Nationalist experiences, destabilizes a settled vocabulary, and serves as a special embodiment of the poet's resilient lyric appetite. In the following, we will see the irony in Mahon's poems is not a mere modifier, but a lasting pattern that runs through the poet's writing career; not necessarily a kind of escapism, but a form of involvement and emotional compatibility; not a problematic device, but a means of resisting black and white representation.

Keywords

Derek Mahon, irony, Irish poetry, times of crisis

So face the brave new world with a wry grin
of tolerant irony, not of impotent hate;
but undermine the system from within
or hide away where any extraneous thought
derided by the regime is wrapped in mist
and mystery, if such places still exist. (Mahon 2018:58)

In this, the last stanza of “Brave New World”, the Irish poet Derek Mahon offers a summary of his lifelong responses to a world consistently fueled by crisis: either practice the idea of silen-

ce as "one of those old hermits" (Mahon 2011: 55) or counter against a perhaps worse version of Huxley's dystopian world with "a wry grin / of tolerant irony". Undisputedly acknowledged as a poet of irony, Mahon's works display an intriguing relation between the issues of identity, lyric responsibility and artistic accuracy in a turbulent historical background. As "the single most noticed yet unchallenged factor" (Brearton 213) in Mahon's poetry, irony has become a keyword in understanding Mahonian poetics which cannot be accessed without involving the problematic historical background in Northern Ireland.

Though irony is "a fundamental word in the lexicon of Mahon criticism" (Homen 108), it is strangely a less carefully examined trait that is sometimes laden with misunderstandings. There is a tendency for critics to link the irony in Mahon's poems with the poet's "pessimistic view on reality and experience" (Homen 108) and a kind of Mahonian escapism. Justin Quinn writes, "It was difficult to talk about anything in that Mahon poem without being ironically sad that one was living now, and not some other time" (Quinn, qtd. in O'Callaghan 49). Seamus Deane views Mahon's irony as "deflecting attention away from history and responsibility" (Deane, qtd. in Burton 8). Mahon's ironic disposition is thus at the risk of being reduced to evasiveness, and its role of promoting lyric responsibility has been much neglected.

While irony is easily spotted in Mahon's poems, it is seldom regarded as a significant pattern that runs through Mahon's poetics. Though "it would be difficult to find any critical study of Mahon that does not mention his ironic perspective" (Brearton 213), more often than not, it is a word that occasionally appears as a convenient comment on the poet's stylistic feature and then quickly slips away. For the poet, being ironic is more than an easily made gesture. Developing his career with the shadows of ingrained sectarianism, political tensions, riots, and violence in the Irish and Northern Irish context, Mahon's employment of irony functions at a more complex level and it should be examined with attentiveness. This article argues that Mahonian irony does not simply function to signify the opposite of a predetermined intention. Instead, it becomes, as Claire Colebrook writes, "the expression of both sides or viewpoints at once in the form of contradiction or paradox" (Colebrook 54). With its tolerance and indecisiveness, Mahon's irony has become a special vehicle that works to frustrate the singular view of identity, blur the boundaries of different lived experiences, and ultimately resist fixity in an overheated cultural environment afflicted with division and bias.

The question of irony, as Mahon said, “may seem unimportant, but it is really quite central” (Mahon 2012: 67). From Socrates, the “first victim” (Avanessian 1) of irony according to Kierkegaard, to “medieval and Renaissance rhetoricians” who “play the dubious game of defining and deciphering irony” (Avanessian 3), to German romantic critics, and more voices in modern contexts, the definition and application of irony are never settled. In Mahon’s case, to understand irony in his poems is first to examine the culturally claustrophobic environment the poet was born into. Writing in a deeply divided society troubled by sectarianism and political complexity, the poet’s ironic disposition is inevitably culturally specific and is closely connected with how he responds to the emergencies in his own community. In the quoted stanza above, placing “tolerant irony” in opposition to “impotent hate”, Mahon indicates that irony displays traits that are intrinsically against “hate”, the one-dimensional and “impotent” emotional release that plays a dominant role in the Troubles (1968-1998). The tolerant irony, embodying pluralism and rejecting passivity, suggests a tactic that could be employed to “undermine the system from within”. In Mahon’s vocabulary, “system” is a recurring word that points to any closed and stiff mechanism that is “unlived, unfelt” (2018: 32) and thus needs to be undermined from within: pour sand without stint/ in complex systems meant/ to make the world go round/ at an increasing pace/ then listen for the sound/ of engines seizing up/ and shuddering to a stop. (2020: 20) As a concentrated form of “any idol or idea, creed or king” (MacNeice 28), it “system” rejects pluralism and ambiguity and represents the rigid “acquisitive force that rules us and would rule the universe” (Mahon 2018: 59). And in Northern Ireland, the firmest system could be the idea of identity. Peter McDonald writes about the paradox in the use of the problematic word identity in *Mistaken Identity*:

A sense of identity might seem to point up the sheer individuality of experience, its unrepeatability particularity; in fact, the idea of identity is employed almost always to emphasize the common nature of experiences, and to provide these experiences with a significance and meaning already mapped out in cultural or historical terms (McDonald 7).

In Northern Ireland, the word “identity”, often dependent on one community or another, has largely lost its “unrepeatability particularity” and becomes a “collective” noun that involves certain religious and political allegiances. The word thus breeds identity thinking that could

be toxic in a deeply divided society. Habitually requiring a firm commitment to community and a one-dimensional emotional response, identity thinking and identity discourse have become a formidable system that continually produces intolerance. The poet places the word "tolerant" before irony, not only because irony, as an embodiment of language flexibility, cannot be achieved without the interaction between interlocutors and the changing contexts and is thus tolerant by nature, but because the word carries a special weight in Northern Irish context. As Peter McDonald says, "intolerance is, indeed, the reflex which both 'traditions' in Northern Ireland need to unlearn" (McDonald 18). The "traditions", referring to the opposing identity groups in local strife, have caused lasting sectarian violence and turbulence that underpin the existing "traditions".

Behind the "traditions" lies a fear of being obscured, assimilated and incorporated into an all-encompassing discourse dominated by a certain community. The fear of being devoured, and then defined is communally experienced by Catholics and Protestants, Unionists and Nationalists alike. The haunting historical conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Republic have given rise to a need for a clear sense of cultural border, upon which different groups could reply and establish a distinctive identity. And this has brought a provincial fervor that insists upon a clear identification with a meaning which is, as McDonald writes, "already mapped out in cultural or historical terms" (McDonald 7). Identity seems to have become a word that cannot be approached without the encoding of certain ideologies in the Northern Irish context. The liabilities of identity have also found their way into the literary and artistic realm. As Andrew Waterman observes, Northern Irish poets suffer the "constraint of being expected to define exactly where he stands in relation to some or other concept of nationalism and cultural allegiance" (Waterman, qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 97). The constraint has implicitly put any poetic imagination that deviates from such expectations at risk of being problematic.

There exists for Mahon a perhaps more damaging system that needs to be "undermined from within". He said, "The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but between the fluidity of a possible life (poetry is a great lubricant) and the rigor mortis of archaic postures, political and cultural" (Mahon, qtd. in Andrews 17). Mahon is keenly aware that the problem lies not so much in the conflicts between one community and another as between fluidity and fixity, the two intrinsically opposing states of life. During his lifetime,

the poet seems to have chosen to remain a self-imposed outsider compared to his contemporaries. Unlike his fellow poet Michael Longley who stays behind and lives through the entire period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Mahon lives a half expatriate life, leaving traces in France, Canada and the United States. And unlike Seamus Heaney, Mahon temperamentally prefers distance over involvement, dislocation over commitment. Yet it would be unfair to say that the poet is evasive of crisis. Instead, Mahon has a much more acute sense of what the real crisis is: the state of fixity in an “over-determined, over-defined environment” (Longley 194). Irony then, embodying an inauthentic language with changeable nature, has become a liberating poetic device that presents “something in flux” (Hutcheon, qtd in Brearton 214) against fixity.

“Afterlives”, the opening poem of Mahon’s 1975 collection *The Snow Party*, is dedicated to James Simmons, who “at one point was forever accusing” Mahon of leaving the North and thus his “roots” behind (Mahon, qtd. in Haughton 94). Yet this poem does not prove Mahon’s guilt of evading his identity as a Northern Protestant. Mahon in this poem displays the difficulty of speaking “I” as “we” and of unifying different lived experiences in a tangled social background through many degrees of irony. In the first part of “Afterlives”, the speaker looks out over London, a city “Rain-fresh in the morning light” (Mahon 2011: 57). The opening stanza, changing perspective from slumber to sobriety, the dark to the bright, the inside to the outside, indicates a promising vision that would come along. The poet continues to write, “This is our element, the bright / Reason on which we rely / For the long-term solutions”. However, the lines here are entwined with irony as “our element” is strangely evoked in “the city not ourselves”. The Ulster and England relationship is immediately problematized. While the “rain-fresh” city summons up light and reason for the speaker, it is a place that represents typical English experience and stands for “an alien and hostile culture” (Byrne 67) for many. Also ironically, it is not the “the bright / Reason” on which “we rely / For long-term solutions”, but the ongoing violence that happens “in a back street”. Thus, the words “our” and “we” implicitly refer to division and alienation instead of an imagined solidarity that consolidates a sense of belonging. The poet deliberately draws attention to the speaker’s double consciousness as someone who reluctantly identifies himself as a part of the “middle-class shits” (Mahon 2011: 57) and at the same time, attempts to free himself from the constraints of such identification. The view of the rain-fresh London thus simultaneously holds “a strong symbolic attraction for the liberal Ulster mind” (Byrne 66) and hints at the difficulty of speaking as someone stuck in the splitting of both the society and the mind.

The development of "Afterlives" implies that there is no simple opposition when complex emotions are evoked in a volatile environment. As Colebrook notes, "any reader who feels that 'behind' the irony there is a hidden sense has fallen into the very simplicity and singleness of viewpoint that irony sets out to destroy" (Colebrook 54). Mahon's employment of irony presents more than one state of mind and perspective that frustrate any interpretation of a predetermined authorial intention. In the second part of "Afterlives", changing location from London to Belfast, Mahon presents a tale of two cities that reinforces the difficulty of locating a split self on an identity map. The second part begins with the line: "I am going home by sea / For the first time in years" (Mahon 2011: 58). The sea voyage suspiciously conveys an incomprehension which is accompanied by an unsettling and everlasting churning. Haughton calls it "a night-crossing back to Belfast" (Haughton 96). If it is a night-crossing for the poet, it is a journey that does not guarantee its destination and is a "crossing" that eventually fails to cross. The "grey lock", "dry dock", and "naked bulb" in Belfast lock suggest that while the geographical distance can be easily bridged, the psychological distance ironically remains a problem unsolved for the speaker. And the problem is further affirmed in the following lines where the speaker can hardly recognize a city that is "so changed / By five years of war" (Mahon 2011: 58). The sharp incongruity between memory and reality leads the poet to the seemingly detached natural environment: "But the hills are still the same/ Grey-blue above Belfast" (Mahon 2011: 58). Yet, the line is not without irony. The sense of familiarity and certainty points at the momentarily self-created comfort upon which the speaker relies to alleviate his sense of displacement. Mahon reveals it in "Homecoming":

We cannot start
At this late date
With a pure heart
Or having seen
The picture plain
Be ever in-
Nocent again. (Mahon 1972:1)

Split into two parts and separated by a line break, the broken "in-nocent" is an evidence that the innocence lost cannot be regained even in a textual space. In "Afterlives", similarly, though the hills seem to be untouched, they could no longer be imagined as innocent in a

city that has suffered five years of war and violence. Yet Mahon's irony is not decisive here. The grey-blue hills, pointing at a space "above" the turbulent ground, are also suggestive of the speaker's inner residual faith amid circumstances that provide nothing but change, unease, and uncertainty. The poet concludes the poem with these lines:

Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
And lived it bomb by bomb
I might have grown up at last
And learnt what it meant by home. (Mahon 2011: 58)

The ending lines of "Afterlives" contain an unstable irony that shifts between the opposite experiences. Rhyming "bomb" with "home", Mahon clearly provokes a sharp sense of loss and violence. Yet the assumption of staying behind and experiencing the turbulence physically is made both out of guilt and a possible "avoidance of any real responsibility" (Byrne 67). Here earnestness and deception coexist in a state of indecisiveness. The emotional conflicts come at a confluence with the help of irony which allows the different states of mind to unfold. John Byrne comments that the poet is just "attitudinising" and the "emotional intensity is not achieved within the poem" (Byrne 67). While Byrne is right in perceiving the lack of emotional intensity here, it should be noted that the effect of intensity is excluded from the goal of the poem in the first place. The poem is essentially a weaving together of homecoming and alienation, guilt and evasiveness, English and Northern Irish experiences. Coming home, for a poet whose imagination is built upon the contrary of solidarity and commitment, is impossible to be fully achieved. The poem itself, which is split into two parts that coexist under the same title, presents a complex combination of what's said and unsaid, what's imagined and experienced.

Mahon once wrote interestingly about William Butler Yeats, "No one could describe Yeats as ironical (sarcastic sometimes, never ironical); indeed, it was always part of his public persona [...] that he was, if anything, too much in earnest" (Mahon 2012). The poet seems to imply that being ironical is somewhat close to being resistant to emotional intensity. John Hewitt can claim that a poet "must be a rooted man, must carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve" (Hewitt 115). Yet Mahon can never arrive at such a firm and definite statement as a poet whose work is at its most powerful when emotional fluidity and flexi-

bility are combined in an ironic language. Resisting the identity that could be consolidated in a home space, the poet again affirms that no direct experiences could be easily incorporated into a ready framework.

A similar tone can be discerned in one of Mahon's earlier poems "Spring in Belfast". In this much-discussed poem, the speaker enforces himself to make the statements while he is walking in "this desperate city": "I remember not to forget"; "one part of my mind must learn to know its place" (Mahon 1999: 13). While the statements contain some degree of emotional sincerity, there is a latent irony that is strenuously woven into them. It is precisely because forgetting is continuously happening and other parts of the poet's mind are resisting the act of learning that the poet must repeatedly remind himself in a seemingly resolute manner. The poet ends with the lines: "this desperate city / Should engage more than my casual interest / exact more interest than my casual pity" (Mahon 2011: 15). As Haughton comments, here Mahon shows "a kind of reluctant solidarity", simultaneously "resisting and acknowledging kinship with the city he grew up in" (Haughton 34). Mahon suggests that there is no easy way to talk about identity in a tangled historical background. And the poet's not-decisive irony creates an emotional tolerance capable of presenting different states of mind and resisting a black and white categorization. Magdalena Kay once commented, while Mahon's "language gains open-endedness through its self-ironizing tendency", "epiphany and irony rarely come together" (Kay 85) in his works. However, Mahon's poems aim not so much at achieving epiphany as presenting entwined emotional possibilities and increasing the indecisive "grey" zone. As Mahon writes in "Art Poétique", "best is a grey, indefinite verse / where the exact and vague combine" (Mahon 2020: 53). And the poems essentially weave together the entwined feelings and the different lived experiences.

"Everything is Going to Be All Right" proves the poet's ability to create emotional compatibility using latent irony. Read by the actor Andrew Scott, the poem has brought comfort to many during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, reading it straight risks missing the latent ironic voice behind a seemingly heartening declaration. The first sign of irony can already be felt in the opening lines. The poet depicts a serene scene in which the speaker contemplates the flying clouds:

“How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?” (Mahon 2011: 104)

Here, the question of “How should I not to be glad” is put in a manner of self-persuasion and is tinted with the speaker’s inner doubt and a kind of secret reluctance. There is a slight strenuousness and one cannot arrive at the implied answer easily, as the answer implied is an unstable one. What immediately follows is a sudden change of tone: “there will be dying, there will be dying” (Mahon 2011: 104). The repetitive declaration contrasts sharply with the serene scene that is set at the beginning of the poem. Though the poet quickly shifts from the gloomy death picture and writes, “but there is no need to go into that”, the echoing sound between “dying” and words such as “everything” and “flying” in the following lines reminds us of the lingering shadow of death and violence. The poet continues, “the sun rises in spite of everything / and the far cities are beautiful and bright” (Mahon 2011: 104). As Haughton comments, there exists “a universal self-contradiction between ‘everything’ and ‘everything’” (Haughton 147). While the rising sun conveys a hopeful outlook that resists both a gravitational drag and an unpleasant reality, it could also imply an ongoing given life that endlessly repeats itself “in spite of everything”, which is a familiar scene in Mahon’s poems. In “The Sea in Winter”, Mahon writes in the last stanza that “Meanwhile the given life goes on / there is nothing new under the sun”, and he concludes the poem with lines “I who know nothing go to teach / While a new day crawls up the beach” (Mahon 2011: 108). The new day that “crawls up the beach” is ironically not new and it is suggestive of an enforced and inevitable endless circle in which people are stuck. Similarly, the poet writes in “Ecclesiastes” that “God help you, stand on a corner stiff / with rhetoric, promising nothing under the Sun” (Mahon 2011: 36). Echoing the prophet of “Ecclesiastes”, the poet provides an image in which “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down [...] the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me”.¹ Thus the “bright and beautiful” cities under the rising sun in this poem are, on the one hand, the representation of serenity and hope, and on the other hand, the indication of lurking futility and frustration.

The poet continues, “I lie here in a riot of sunlight”. The “riot of sunlight” has an ironic implication, as the word “riot” refers both to the vitality that sustains life and the violence that ends life. Echoing “there will be dying”, the “riot” in the line reveals a hidden threat behind an assuring scene. The lurking ironic voice in this poem undermines a sense of cert-

ainty that provides courage, faith, and comfort. And the declaration of "Everything is going to be all right" is shadowed by the threat of death and violence. Nonetheless, the irony in this poem is not decisive but reserved and humane, as it does not aim to frustrate the pleasure of contemplating the clouds and the hope towards the future. As Haughton comments, the poem can be "read with or without irony" (Haughton 147). The poet combines a comforting voice with a latent ironic undertone in the tangled "self-contradiction", providing both a humane perspective and a perilous outlook. The latent irony in this poem functions as part of the poet's "watchful heart" (Mahon 2011: 104) that guards hope and at the same time, remains alert to the dying and the riot. Magdalena Kay comments that "A Mahon poem does not engage in illusionary antics or light-headed optimism". It is difficult for the poet to imagine hope and faith without imagining what might undermine and negate them simultaneously. Yet this does not mean that the hopeful promise is invalid. As Brendan Kennelly writes, "There is an element of cruelty in his perception and in his precision but there is no lack of compassion" (Kennelly 133). The poet has achieved a special emotional tolerance and compatibility that allow different interpretations to co-exist at the same time and prove resistant to single interpretations.

Irony for Mahon is far more than a mere rhetorical device as it also inherently involves the tension between lyric responsibility and artistic privacy. In "Rage for Order", a poem published at the height of the Troubles, Mahon negotiates the vexing relationship between irony, identity, and the role of the poet. Mahon in this poem introduces a self-indulgent, grandiloquent and unrealistic poet who hides behind his "high window" and remains seemingly indifferent to the ongoing turbulence on the street. And the poet seems to imply that the anonymous poet who remains "far / From his people" (Mahon 1999: 47) with "terminal ironies" is the one who gains a necessary critical distance in an environment "composed of earth and fire" (Mahon 1999:19). The poem opens with the line "somewhere beyond", which immediately brings in a tone of aloofness and indicates a distance from the community, and thus from affinity with identification. Mahon compares the poet to Nero and implies that he himself, with a posture "Grandiloquent and / Deprecating", is the one who fiddles while Belfast burns. The image of the reclusive, marginal and impotent poet in "Rage for Order" is based on Mahon himself who longs to be "through with history" (Mahon 1999: 64). The poet's aloof tone then, for many, becomes a gesture to stay uninvolved. And some critics have thus linked the seemingly disinterested manner to a kind of typical Mahon-

ian escapism that allows the poet to keep himself away from the “centripetal force of the hot world” (Kay 108).

However, defending a private nature of poetic creativity, irony in this poem is indicative of a necessary distance from both “his people” and the “traditions” that his people represent. Mahon once talked about his relationship with the community in his interview with John Brown. While admitting that it is dangerous to opt out of community, the poet points out that “a more obvious and easier danger, of course, is to be absorbed by it” (Mahon 123). Depicting his antonymous, ironic poet in “Rage for Order” as someone who deliberately keeps distance from the street, Mahon avoids the possible danger of being absorbed by a fixed identity discourse in an environment that breeds claustrophobia. It’s also worth noticing that Mahon’s seemingly aloof response is not necessarily a form of escapism. Instead, it can be seen as a germinal stage for involvement and engagement. Mahon never truly opts for “a place out of time / A palace of porcelain” where he could perfect his “cold dream” (Mahon 2011: 64). In the last stanza, Mahon hints at a hidden interconnection between the rarefied poet and his people, which is not achieved through a common identity, but a shared “rage for order”. Though the poet seems to remain an anonymous watcher, sticking to his own “eddy of semantic scruple” (Mahon 2011: 47), it is the desperate poet with his “dying art” who ironically provides a future resource that can be employed to stand against the historical atrocity. Mahon concludes the poem with the lines:

To build up
with a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long now till I have need of his
Terminal ironies. (Mahon 2011: 48)

As the ending lines indicate, the “dying art” partly transforms itself into a lasting art that is both terminal and germinal in its nature. And the role of the poet and his art calls for a reevaluation. In this poem, the poet’s retreat from the “scattered glass” does not create a self-contained space for an escapist to enjoy his artistic autonomy. Instead, the highbrow poet with his “terminal ironies” is involved in what happens in the street in the first place, as

the rage for order is the inner projection of both the poet's and his people's emotional outcry. The poet's "wretched rage for order", contrasting Wallace Stevens's "blessed rage for order" (Stevens 130) that is confidently coined, reveals a tortured struggle against violence, disorder, and futility. And the room behind the poet's "high window" in "Rage for Order" is secretly exposed to the ongoing violence in the street. The scene of "somewhere beyond" is pulled back and set together with "the scorched gable end / And the burnt-out / Buses" (Mahon 2011: 47). Thus, the distance between the room and the street does not point to a total separation, but a hidden connection. The speaker "I", representing the people in the street, confronts the violence "when the drums start" and claims to make history. However, as Kay observes, the bold "I" is ironically "naïve [...] since 'history' is comprised of subtle as well as overt influence" (Kay 109). Fran Brearton also points out, "while the poet's art may be a 'dying' one [...] it is, in fact, the embattled speaker of this poem who is involved in, literally, a 'dying art', that of war" (Brearton 215). The "naïve" aspects of the speaker's determination make the speaker's turning to the poet for his terminal irony both necessary and inevitable at the end of the poem. Thus, the desperate poet here is not a detached observer, nor an unrealistic hypocrite, but a hidden participant whose insistence on both artistic privacy and lyric responsibility wins him a lasting resource.

The poet's terminal irony in this poem deliberately creates and bridges the distance, challenges and affirms its own value, and proves itself not a form of escapism, but a choice made to respond to unsettling social circumstances outside his "high window". The desperate and unrealistic poet in "Rage for Order", staying away from his community, proves the necessity of critical distance and the "terminal ironies" that keep against blind fervor that stems from overheated identity thinking. And thus, irony is not "the rhetorical / device of a Claudian emperor". Instead, it contains the potential to create. Mahon also makes it clear in "Ovid in Tomis":

The Muse is somewhere

Else, not here

By this frozen lake –

Or, if there, then I am

Not poet enough

To make the connection. (Mahon 2011: 144)

Mahon stresses the word “Else” not to indicate an unbridgeable distance, but to suggest that ultimately, the distance is created for making the connection. Though the muse is “not here / By this frozen lake” and the poet with his dying art lives “somewhere beyond” the violence, Mahon implies that the ideas of “else” and “here” are inseparable and both of them could be understood as a form of engagement. Peter McDonald argues that the speaker in Mahon’s “Knut Hamsun in Old Age” is “able to look inside and outside at the same time” (McDonald 97). Similarly, the desperate poet in “Rage for Order” is endowed with a hidden ability to perceive what’s inside and outside the room and is able to nourish his irony to understand the society “from which it is distanced” (McDonald 97). The poet with his ironies creates a critical distance that leads to a hidden connection and compatibility that allows the coexistence of both distance and involvement, steering the poetry towards a more complicated outlook.

In “A Quiet Spot”, it seems that the poet attempts to negotiate with his past self and head for “a clearer vision”:

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 leaves. (Mahon 2011: 333)

John McAuliffe argues that “A Quiet Spot” is the evidence that Mahon “had moved from being the ironic, suffering subject of a terrible world to a more active, if quixotic dreamer-up of solutions” (McAuliffe). However, McAuliffe may be too quick in arriving at his optimistic interpretation. As Solnick comments, it is easy to “miss the multiple levels of irony and turn into a Romantic pastoral” (Solnick 143) when it comes to the analysis of this poem. The line “Time to create a future from the past” is tinted with ironic color. While there is “the potential instructive yields of dialogue between the past and present” (Flannery 43), the past in Mahon’s vision would usually evoke either “a barbarous cycle” which features violence or illusive and vague old times—“The further back you go the worse they get” (Mahon 2018: 58).

Though the poet attempts to “past hedge” and aims at “a clearer vision”, the ending lines seem to suggest that such goals can only be achieved under the condition of tuning out “the babbling radio waves”. The perspective is furtively shifted from the radio waves to the leaves and from the still unsettling social circumstances to a soothing natural environment. The treatment of the ending is similar to “The Snow Party”, the title poem of Mahon’s 1975 collection *The Snow Party*. Shifting the view from “the tiles of Kyoto” to “the cold sea” and from “the house of Nagoya” to “the hills of Ise” (Mahon 1975: 8), the poet indicates that the snow in this poem is always falling towards a detached environment where humans remain as outsiders. In “The Snow Party”, Mahon relies upon a muting and purifying power of snow to silence the violence here and elsewhere, and in “A Quiet Spot”, the poet speaks in a self-comforting and self-persuading voice to affirm that “The right place / is a quiet place like this” (Mahon 2011: 333). The two poems, however, seem to eventually prove the failure of securing an undisturbed place the “boiling squares” (Mahon 1975: 8) and the “babbling radio waves” cannot be easily pacified. And “A Quiet Spot” becomes both the declaration to walk away from irony and the evidence of the impossibility of it.

For those critics who quickly link Mahonian irony with escapism, what they perhaps fail to recognize is Mahon’s own reflection and evaluation on his device. While knowing his “terminal ironies” could create a necessary detachment from the community, the poet himself remains alert to the possible danger contained within it. Mahon mentions Antonio Gramsci’s definition of irony in “Yeats and the Lights of Dublin” after the Troubles were uneasily brought to an end:

Gramsci, in his prison writings, called irony ‘the disease of the interregnum’, which makes it sound peculiarly excruciating. While the world got on with the business of history, specifically the mutation of societies, irony remained and perhaps remains a resource for rueful aristocrats, Ivy League humanists and, no doubt, liberal Ulster Protestants like Louis MacNeice” (Mahon 2012: 67).

Like MacNeice, Mahon is a member of the liberal Ulster Protestants whose personal dilemma as “ironic heirs of a threadbare colonialism” (Mahon, qtd in Haughton 59) is an epitome of the unsettling social and cultural circumstances in Northern Ireland. Mahon writes with the knowledge that irony, while opening the path to plural perspectives, may contribute to a

prolonged interregnum, a possible disease for a world experiencing drastic split and change. In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci writes, “in the case of historical action, the element of “irony” would be, precisely, excessively literary [...] and would indicate a form of detachment connected, rather, to a somewhat amateurish skepticism” (Gramsci 117). Though what Gramsci emphasizes is the public field and “historical action”, not the literary world, his assessment of irony makes it clear that the detachment aspect of irony could lead to superficiality as the distance created would possibly frustrate authentic change. The ironic tone then in the Northern context could easily slip into what Gramsci calls an “amateurish skepticism”. In this case, irony is at the risk of turning into a “morbid stagnation which strips the individual capacity to change things at any scale” (Solnick 143).

The poet himself is even more alert to the unexamined and unreflective irony than the critics who remain suspicious of his stance. Keenly aware of the possible limits of the device he employs, Mahon is careful not to turn the ironic disposition into a mere gesture that contributes to a passive “morbid stagnation”. What the poet emphasizes, as his career develops, is how irony, with its dual perception and changeable nature, could work to undercut the daily lunacy and undermine a stiff system that looms large. The poet’s employment of irony is embedded within the background of social upheaval and thus essentially different from Gramsci’s “disease of the interregnum”. Auden, Mahon’s “alter ego, an alternative self” (Persall 37), is described as “a victim of nothing but irony” (Mahon 2011: 177) in “St. Mark’s Place”. At the end of “St. Mark’s Place”, however, the poet indicates that it is the victim of irony who prescribes “a cure / for our civilization and its discontents” and sustains “us now as we face a more boring future” and teaches people “the courage to be ourselves” (Mahon 2011: 177). Freeing Auden from the persecution, the poet implies that “the victim of irony” could also be the one who teaches and creates without getting stuck in superficial skepticism in times of crisis. And irony is not necessarily a problematic device that hinders “the individual capacity to change things” (Solnick 143). It could, as Mahon suggests in “Brave New World”, “Afterlives”, and “Rage for Order”, not only create an emotional tolerance that stands against the fixed identity-based response in a constricting environment but promote the ability to undermine a domineering system from within.

Examining the world with the same sharpness in his seventies, Mahon in “An Age of Revolution” confirms again that poetic creativity in turbulent times is both a self-warranting

Mahon states in this poem, "the writing game can be so airy-fairy" in an age of manic revolution with half irony and half sincerity. Since "a little thought" can soon "resolves / an obvious question of exact vocabulary", writing itself can appear weak and inefficient. The poet writes: It won't do to face the future with an oblique/ and self-delighting virtuosity kick – / or is this the only practicable response (Mahon 2018:54). "Oblique" here, remotely echoing the "oblique light on the trite" in "Courtyards in Delft", is typical Mahonian as it reveals the way the poet observes the world: a sharp and sudden glance over banality and barbarism. While acknowledging the poet's own "kick" will not be enough to face the dystopian future, Mahon emphasizes that the capabilities of poetry can still be seen as a firm resistance to a turbulent and constricting world. And the poet's tolerant irony has simultaneously become a part of a game and a kick, a self-delighting activity and a firm action against the system. It points at a kind of inner resilience that resists a simple interpretation or a snap judgment in a world that succumbs to a rigid and over-simplistic categorization. And it promotes, as Mahon writes in "Smoky Quartz", both "tolerance and concentration" (Mahon 2020: 46).

Linda Hutcheon writes, "the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is impossible to fix his or her text convincingly" (Hutcheon 1994: 16). In Mahon's case, it is equally impossible to pin down a shared conclusion as the indecisive irony creates the shifting layers that challenge any ready interpretations. In the poet's interview with Mike Murphy, Mahon states: "I'm not going to interpret it [...] you have to encounter the poems at first hand because I will not stand between myself and the poems" (Mahon qtd. in Murphy 163). Consciously underplaying his own role and emphasizing the necessary distance between poetry and poet, Mahon affirms that ultimately, it is the reader who produces the meaning of the poems and perceives the ironic moments that are carefully dropped between the lines. Hence Mahon's irony becomes, as Pilny comments, "a matter of communication, intertextual as well as, for instance, interpersonal or inter-institutional" (Pilny 3), and it calls for an interpretation that pays attention to the different layers created and leaves room for more possibilities. In a 1984 prose work titled "A Cave Hill Childhood Memory", Mahon writes:

The North Belfast of Brian Moore's *The Feast of Lupercal* is where I grew up: an area stretching from Carlisle Circus to Glengormley, from the Shore Road to the Cave Hill...It was up there, I think, that I first realized that the Antrim Road was only one

road among many. Looking down, I saw other roads through and around the city; and from the Cave Hill itself you could see five counties and much else besides: sunlight on distant waters to east and west, islands, mountains...And there was even more to all this than met the eye. (1984:18)

Looking over Belfast from Cave Hill, the poet realized how territorial differences between one place and another could become insignificant compared to the infinite horizons that unfold before the eye. The boundaries lose their effects when these regions are placed within an expanding horizon and a universal interconnectedness is strengthened through plural perceptions and understandings of roads, counties, islands, and mountains. In a much later poem titled "Horizons" in *Against the Clock*, the feelings evoked by Cave Hill still have a strong presence: "Relatedly, beyond the blue horizon/ beyond the rising and declining sun/ are more horizons" (Mahon 2018: 13). The poet is decidedly against a single point of view almost from his earliest writings, and irony with its shifting layers has become one of the ways to undercut the fixed, closed, and one-dimensional perception of what's "incorrigibly plural" (MacNeice 30).

"A good poem", Mahon says, "is a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level" (Mahon qtd.in Andrews 17). Interestingly, the poet combines "honest" and "subtlety", as the word honest usually indicates directness and straightforward expression while the word subtlety implies elusiveness and sometimes ambiguity. Yet the phrase accurately characterizes Mahon's own poems and his irony—being honest with contradictions and promoting "the fluidity of a possible life" (Mahon, qtd. in Andrews 17). In "Art and Reality", the poet ironically juxtaposes "fun" and "funeral" in the line "the shining land of childhood, fun and funeral" (Mahon 2011: 357). Implicitly referring to James Joyce's word construction "funferall" that appears in *Finnegans Wake*, Mahon presents a seemingly contradictory coexistence of joy and sorrow, and hints at their subtle inner connection—the two sides of the same Joycean coin. For the poet, the coexistence of mutually exclusive elements presents both complexity and artistic accuracy. And Mahon's irony, typically pointing to the co-presence of contradictory forces and the state of "textual indeterminacy" (Denman 29), works to frustrate the singular view and resist fixity.

As discussed in this article, irony in Mahon's works does not ask for a quick detection of a

predetermined authorial intention. Instead, it often "relies upon the reader actively detecting the internal contradictions with which he laces the text" (Solnick 127). The shifting layers of irony in Mahon's poems offer an exploration of complex emotional dimensions and resistance of fixity in times of crisis. The distance created by the poet's "tolerant irony" (Mahon 2018: 58) allows for the coexistence of tangled experiences and prevents the poetry from being tied down to a specific stance. Mahonian irony does not point toward the opposite of a stable and predetermined intention. Rather, it blurs the boundaries of different experiences and is a special embodiment of the poet's resilient lyric appetite. The tolerance and resilience contained in irony eventually enable the poet to find a way to respond to the reality that is, on the one hand, too volatile and unsettling to be known and, on the other hand, apt to embrace an over-simplistic categorization.

Notes

1. Ecclesiastes (King James Version) 1:2-5; 2: 17.

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