

## Blue plaques and farther shores: Derek Mahon's "A Kensington Notebook".

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"A Kensington Notebook", freely modelled on Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, revisits the pre-1914 Kensington of Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis before world war and cultural disarray set them on downward paths to self-delusion, treason and despair. With its dense fabric of allusion, the poem resembles a highly condensed critical essay, one whose undeclared aim is to gauge the immediate relevance of their achievement at a time of deepening cultural crisis. Mahon's detached, urbane and ever watchful stance is, as usual in his work, the cover for some rigorous self-examination.

Published in 1984, a few months before his return to Ireland at the midpoint in a career spent for the most part in England, "A Kensington Notebook"<sup>1)</sup> has been called Mahon's "goodbye to London".<sup>2)</sup> The phrase recalls Pound's footnote ("...distinctly a farewell to London") to the title page of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920),<sup>3)</sup> a work to which the poem owes a significant literary debt, and alerts us to the possibility of a shared agenda beyond their more obvious relationship. Mahon has never acknowledged this valedictory function but it is at least implicit in his choice of the poem to head his next volume, *Antarctica*, a sombre collection of farewells and leavetakings, while with its next appearance in *Selected Poems* in pointed juxtaposition with "Going Home",<sup>4)</sup> the handkerchief waving

had become routine. Twelve years from its first publication, the poem can be seen as a watershed in Mahon's work from which we can look back at his long career as an émigré poet beginning with that resonantly titled first volume, *Night-Crossing*, and simultaneously forward to the new bearings his work would take on his arrival in Dublin. Again, what seemed in 1984 a superficial indebtedness to its Poundian model has evolved into a more profound resemblance.

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Imitations, versions and translations of other writers' works have assumed an increasing prominence in Mahon's output since he began writing in the late sixties and, synchronised with a recent shift to dramatic adaptations, have dominated it since his return to Ireland. Added to the various tributes his poetry contains to a community of artistic rebels likewise haunted by the "vast dark" of modern existence (Beckett, Munch, Rimbaud, Corbière, Van Gogh, Cavafy, De Nerval, Malcolm Lowry and others), these have fostered a reputation as a European writer, with its implication that Mahon has managed to transcend his Anglo-Irish origins. On the other hand, that the "Troubles" of his native province have continued to exercise an irresistible pressure on his imagination is suggested by the recent addition to his list of favoured luminaries of three writers who hitched their careers, with varying consequences, to a powerful political commitment: Brecht, Camus<sup>5)</sup> and Knut Hamsun. Of these Hamsun seems the least likely candidate for Mahon's brand of literary canonisation, for against the undisputed achievement of his novels and his Nobel Prize for Literature have to be weighed a lifelong distrust of democracy and liberalism, his endorsement of the German

occupation of Norway, war-time meeting with Hitler, and later indictment for treason. However, "Knut Hamsun in Old Age" seeks neither to judge nor to rehabilitate beyond giving the fiery and unrepentant old man the chance to speak for himself, Mahon's object here and in similar poems being the exacting and supremely compassionate one of providing a voice for those whom history has neglected or ostracised. This is also the case for the scapegrace cast of "A Kensington Notebook": Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, each with an unshakable conviction, not unlike Hamsun's (with whom two share the taint of fascist politics), of being victimized for his beliefs.

Whatever the other resemblances to these poems, the presentational strategy of "A Kensington Notebook" differs quite markedly, with semi-dramatic monologue ("Knut Hamsun in Old Age") and second person address ("Brecht in Svendborg", "Death in the Sun") giving way to third person reportage mediated by an unidentified speaker whose elusive shifts of tone recall those of the frame persona of the poem's model, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. The interposing between poem and reader of a speaker who is himself part of the pastiche makes for a complexity of viewpoint which artfully undermines any easy assurance of control on the part of the reader. It is a new departure for Mahon and one which looks forward to recent developments in his work.

Where Mahon most resembles Pound is in the possession of an unusually sensitive ear and the skill, acquired from the extensive translation and adaptation of other writers, of perfect and to all appearances effortless mimicry. He is likewise adept at retaining his own unique identity while speaking through another's voice. This remains the case even when he is most overtly recalling his model,

signalled in the passage which follows by the double recollective frame of brackets and inverted commas:

(Not Dowland, not Purcell  
 'The age demanded',  
 But the banalities  
 Of the *Evening Standard*.)

The form and sophisticated tone of this stanza are copies of a copy, looking back to the urbane and highly flexible quatrain of Théophile Gautier's *Emaux et Camées* which Pound chose as a satiric vehicle for his assault on British post-war culture in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Unlike Pound's, however, Mahon's poem is only in the most incidental way satiric, and it is instructive to see how the Poundian echo in this quotation is held at a discreet distance both by the self-conscious framing and the humorous virtuosity of the pastiche.

Such comparisons may give the misleading impression that the two works are closer in form and structure than they actually are. In fact, where Pound's suite is extremely loose in its ordonnance, and its eighteen constituent poems admit frequent structural variations, Mahon works within a tightly disciplined framework of four interlinked units of eight quatrains apiece. On the other hand, the surfaces of the two sequences look much alike with their dense fabrics of allusion and quotation, words and phrases in inverted commas, and their like austerity of means. Pound's frequent allusions to recondite sources in Western culture are his means of mapping out the tradition from which we have lately declined. Mahon's allusions, by comparison, evoke the abbreviated notetaking of a cultural

tourist:

War artist, he depicts  
 The death-throes of an era  
 While Orpen glorifies  
 Haig, Gough etc.

In content, the two works appear to proceed in quite different directions but again have much in common. The focus in each case is on the social, political and artistic milieu of pre-war Britain which fostered the brief flowering of early modernism, and two of Mahon's portraits (Ford and Pound) have an equivalent in Pound's suite. Mahon's poem also completes Pound's literary-historical perspective by tracing the growth cycle of modernism to the recent present and concluding with the deaths of its earliest architects. The lucid economy of *A Kensington Notebook* can be seen in its finely adjusted shifts of historical focus. Ford's portrait captures the nostalgic ambience of the *aube de siècle*, looking back to an age of bucolic innocence which the war had recently swept away. Pound's, the most confined in time and setting yet wide ranging in its imaginative concerns, reproduces the astounding vortex of energy emanating from a back-street in Kensington. Lewis's portrait deals with *l'entre deux guerres* and the cultural and psychological toll of an era haunted by world war, while the final section, set in a familiar postmodern world of nuclear menace and cultural meltdown, records the last gasps of the whole modernist experiment. The poem's final vision of the ultimate triumph of technological over more humane values, and its muted stocktaking in the face of despair, expose a deep-rooted anxiety which haunts both works: the role of the artist at a time when he

can share few of the fundamental assumptions of his society. The potential tragic cost of the failure to define this role is the burden of Pound's mock obsequies and catalogue of out-of-step artists. Its proven tragic cost, reckoned in the currency of Ford's grandiose delusions, Pound's indictment for treason and Lewis's truculent inhumanity, informs some of the darkest passages of Mahon's poem.

## I

Mahon's portrait of Ford has its equivalent in the tenth poem of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Pound's sardonic sketch of the literary stylist seeking a haven from neglect and social ostracism in rural seclusion. Hugh Kenner describes it as an "anticlimactic redaction of the Lake Isle of Innisfree":<sup>6)</sup>

Beneath the sagging roof  
 The stylist has taken shelter,  
 Unpaid, uncelebrated,  
 At last from the world's welter

Nature receives him;  
 With a placid and uneducated mistress  
 He exercises his talents  
 And the soil meets his distress.

The haven from sophistications and contentions  
 leaks through its thatch;  
 He offers succulent cooking;  
 The door has a creaking latch.

Pound's Ford is a lonely and disillusioned craftsman unwilling to compromise his standards to the literary commercialism of his day. Mahon's is a much more dynamic figure, a bridge between an older and a new generation of writers and a vital catalyst in early modernism: an instigator, chronicler, and victim of change. But the keynote of the portrait is still nostalgia, a yearning for a Lake Isle given shape not by the spartan economics of the "Small Producer" but by rose-tinted memories of the *belle époque*:

There was a great good place  
Of clean-limbed young men  
And high-minded virgins,  
Cowslip and celandine.

In these elegant and ironic lines, that recently departed age has already assumed the timeless dimensions of myth. The wistfulness is Ford's, however, and drawn from the nostalgic retrospective of his important novels, *The Good Soldier* (1915) and the *Parade's End* sequence (1924-8).

This "great good place" is also coterminous with an Edwardian literary world extending from rural Sussex (where Ford's home was located and those of several of his literary contemporaries) to a cosmopolitan London energised by the inflow of émigré artists and writers and by the first experimental stirrings of modernism. At the heart of this creative vortex was South Lodge, a meeting point for London's literary and social worlds, and home of the feminist writer, Violet Hunt, with whom Ford was emotionally involved from 1908 to 1915. These were also the peak years of his editorship of the *English Review*, seedbed for the latest innovations in art and

literature and for Ford's "discoveries" of new talent (including, among others, D. H. Lawrence, Pound and Wyndham Lewis). They were the years too of his self-appointed role as mentor of the world of letters:

Henry James to be visited,  
Lawrence to be prized,  
Conrad to be instructed,  
Yeats to be lionized.

But then came "the thunder-clap" and the whole literary idyll came to an end.

Paradoxically, as the lights were going out across Europe and a generation of artists was being "dumbfounded on the Somme", Ford found the voice that has ensured his posthumous survival, if only as a name on a memorial plaque:

South Lodge is blue-  
Plaqued where Ford set out  
His toy soldiers on the  
Razed table of art.<sup>7)</sup>

Here the romantic obsolescence of Ford's heroes, Edward Ashburnham of *The Good Soldier* and Christopher Tietjens of *Parade's End*, is measured against the cultural catastrophe of the Great War. Scions of the English ruling class, both attempt to live their lives by a rigid and anachronistic code of values which is their inheritance, and thus burdened by history, each is made to suffer for it. Ashburnham is driven to suicide as the price of his sexual corruption while



Tietjens is hounded across the map of war-torn Europe by the spectre of his terrible marriage to emerge in an unfamiliar world where values have changed utterly.

That the Edwardian idyll was itself a sham is the burden of the fifth stanza, where fractured allusions to Ford's novels probe beneath the glossy surface of pre-war society:

(Intrigue at German spas,  
Bombast on golf courses,  
Perfidy in the ministries,  
Bitches in country houses...)<sup>8)</sup>

The vast panorama of history at work in Ford's novels demonstrates that beyond the conflict of imperialist ambitions the war focused a head-on clash of values that grew out of challenges to Victorian moral authority and the material pressures of a new social order. Here Mahon projects the essence of this vision onto a minimalist canvas, blending the data of personal corruption ("German spas" recalls Nauheim, scene of Edward Ashburnham's serial adulteries; "Bombast", the sexual vaunts of the new business mandarins at the Rye golf club in *Some Do Not*) with that of official "perfidy" (the falsifying of military statistics in *A Man Could Stand Up*), as the downward moral spiral of a society heading for war. The roots of the war are thus identified in the complacencies of a secular and materialist society convinced of its unique historical destiny, a pernicious new form of an old heresy:

What price the dewy-eyed  
Pelagianism of home

To a lost generation  
Dumbfounded on the Somme?

History's rebuttal was to thrust us out of the garden of pre-war England into a world that was historically neither progressive nor intelligible.

For literature, the price was the authority of tradition and the past (the "two gross of broken statues...few thousand battered books" of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*), new restrictions on the freedom of expression, and a decisive shift of taste away from avant-garde experiment. Ford, as in so much else, typifies the plight of the serious writer at this period. Plagued by problems in his private life and, after the collapse of the *English Review* and the hostile reception given *The Good Soldier*, uncertainties about his future, he enlisted in the army to break free of a career that now seemed hopeless. After the war he followed Pound to Paris, passionately resentful of England's "persecution" of him and already beginning to take refuge in a grandiose mythology of self as the neglected genius of English letters, a delusion that would become steadily more elaborate and insistent as the downward slope steepened. The self-pity of a man who would find solace thereafter in the writing of self-flattering memoirs and the uncritical adulation of serial women friends is part of the complex resonance of

An old cod in a land  
Unfit for heroes,  
He consecrates his new life to  
Mnemosyne and Eros.

The section closes with the first of three night-crossings into exile. 'The last of England', the famous Victorian narrative painting by Ford's grandfather, Ford Madox Brown, provides the ironic setting for his own departure from England, huddling in the rain with Stella Bowen (the "placid and uneducated mistress" of Pound's poem), as he conveys the Muses' sacred flame to "Paris and Michigan." Behind them, the white cliffs of Dover which form the background to his grandfather's painting, the painting itself, and the now defunct cultural tradition it represents, are seen in a final view "crumbl[ing] in the rain".

## II

Ford's move synchronised perfectly with the shifting of the hub of post-war modernist experiment from London to Paris. Pound had arrived a few months earlier, and was at work on the suite of poems, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, which registered his secession from his past and the forging of a new and distinctively modern voice. Mahon's reproduction of that voice is now doubly tested as the elder poet provides both model and subject.

Of the three portraits, Pound's is the most fully grounded in its setting, for various details of which Mahon draws on Patricia Hutchins' wistful retrospective, *Ezra Pound's Kensington*.<sup>9)</sup> Beyond evoking an artistic milieu, the details also serve the important function of tying to a concrete particularity of time and place a portrait more given to taking allusive detours than either of its neighbours:

The operantics of  
Provence and Languedoc

Shook the Gaudier marbles  
At No.10 Church Walk.

The oblique presentation of the sitter parodies a similar tendency in Pound's suite. It also carries to the point of absurdity the aesthetic of impersonality which Pound perfected through the use of multiple personae. Likewise the delegation of his identity to a title page:

...‘Ezra Pound, M.A.,  
Author of *Personae*’

We are then given the briefest of glimpses of the young American scholar of Romance languages, fastidiously twitching his nostrils and taking his cultural bearings on a set of “invisible antennae”, before dissolving into a pastiche of his own syntax. Thereafter, the dividing line between person and persona, writer and work, is difficult to define.

A like ambiguity attaches to Pound's search for revitalizing currents in the art and literature of the past. On the one hand, the poem seems to ridicule the venture (“operantics.../ Shook the Gaudier marbles”; “Rihaku, nursed Osiris’ / Torn limbs”) in terms which recall the disavowed aesthetic testament of Pound's opening poem, “E.P. Ode pour l'Élection de son Sepulchre”:

For three years out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry; to maintain ‘the sublime’  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—  
No, hardly, but seeing he had been born

In a half-savage country, out of date;  
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;  
Capaneus; trout for factitious bait...

But just as the strictures here are ironic and simultaneously open to counter interpretations, so they are in Mahon's pastiche. "[N]ursed Osiris' torn limbs", for instance, with its allusion to Pound's lecture series, *I gather the limbs of Osiris* (1911), serves both as a recollection of E.P.'s ludicrous attempt "to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry" and as a tribute to Pound's pioneer rescue work of neglected poets.

Elsewhere, the quest moves to a more ethereal music:

...came to know  
Holland St. stone by stone  
As he knew San Zeno-

That 'ultimate perfection'  
At Sirmione, a place  
Of light 'almost solid', each  
Column signed at the base.

The first three lines freely remodel part of a verse letter from Pound to Patricia Hutchins. The poet is recommending the substitution of "Kensington" for "London" in the title of her planned biography:

...But Kensington  
stone by stone as Venice or Perugia  
whole point of its being a life ...  
E. P.'s Kensington.<sup>10)</sup>

Mahon's "Holland St." recalls the small Kensington teashop where, in the words of Richard Aldington, "the Imagist *mouvemong* was born". However, in a portrait that subtly insinuates that Pound's deepest relationships were with a world of dead things, there is an ironic aptness in a knowledge of Holland Street confined to its stones. As in the letter, the phrase "stone by stone" bridges an associative leap from London to Italy, but rather than to Pound's bustling cities, Mahon takes us to the twelfth century church of St. Zeno. Pound was deeply impressed by the church's marvellous signed columns which he saw on a visit in 1911, and he refers to their perfection in *The Spirit of Romance* and at several points in the *Cantos*. The effect of the recollection here is to tie Pound's cultural mission to an aesthetic dream (strongly influenced by his reading of Dante, Cavalcanti and the Troubadours) of a transcendent place of "almost solid" light fringed by the timeless monuments of the past. The vision is austere beautiful but stands at a perilous remove from lower-case reality, and is as stilling in its effect as the sirens' song on the Odyssean voyager of E.P.'s ode. It takes the bells of the far from transcendent church of the next stanza to toll us back to that reality.

The bells of the Kensington parish church of St. Mary Abbots, whose "filthy racket"<sup>11</sup> Pound had frequent cause to complain about, directs our attention to an outer world the poem has hitherto ignored. A riposte to Pound's seismic operantics, the bells express the spirit of an age of democratic culture where art wears an "accelerated grimace" and panders to the debased taste of the herd. Pound's implacable opposition to this new *Zeitgeist* is recalled in the sixth stanza where the banalities of the popular press are used as the infallible yardstick of a taste which is seen tyrannizing over every

manifestation of modern culture. The implications for the artist, whose options in Pound's sketches of Brennbaum, Mr. Nixon, "the stylist", Mauberley etc. are either to compromise his standards or else retreat into some lonely tower of the mind, are likewise a recurrent concern behind the high window of Mahon's poetry:

The ocean glittered quietly in the moonlight  
While heavy metal rocked the discotheques;  
Space-age Hondas farted half the night,  
Fired by the prospect of fortuitous sex.  
I sat late at the window, blind with rage,  
And listened to the tumult down below,  
Trying to concentrate on the printed page  
As if such obsolete bump could save us now.

("Rock Music")

Placed between the historically detailed canvases of sections I and III, the portrait of Pound offers an interesting variation on their pattern. The portraits before and after are odysseys of despair where the artist is first lionised by society in an "opening world" of avant-garde adventure, becomes caught up in a war which destroys the cultural fabric, and ends as a lonely custodian of values in a society that no longer needs or respects him. In Pound's portrait, however, this scenario is no more than a ghostly backdrop and the spotlight has shifted to an autonomous world of art which, though contingent on an historical time and particular place, is limited by neither. This explains the curious polarization of the portrait between the ephemeral and the timeless, and between the parochial and the spatially unbound. Meanwhile, the historical catastrophe overtaking Europe in the interval between these polarities is simply ign-

ored. Accordingly, where the portraits of Ford and Lewis give a central place to the Great War, that place is usurped here by an upheaval which is comically petty and localised. The sole reference to external events comes in the final lines with their glance at Pound's ambiguous role in a later war. But even here, the spotlight is still on art:

The Spirit of Romance  
 Flowered briefly there  
 Among jade animals;  
 And years later where

Confucius of the dooryard  
 Prophet of τὸ καλόν,  
 He draws 'treason' into  
 A Roman microphone.

With richly evocative economy, Mahon juxtaposes the beginning and end of Pound's literary career, linking the young poet to his historical nemesis by that most unlikely of threads, the Spirit of Romance. The phrase evokes the chivalric tradition of medieval literature associated with the Romance languages, the inspiration or daring that prompted the deeds it celebrates and, by extension, any perilous or idealistic quest. These meanings come together in the subject and aims of Pound's first major venture in criticism, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910),<sup>12)</sup> a work fascinating for the glimpses it gives of the young poet testing ideas that would soon be incorporated into the aesthetic rationale of his poetry or provide the basis of his later philosophy, among them, the perennial relevance of the past as a model for the present, and the value of symbolic expression



(as he saw it functioning in Provencal poetry) for providing direct access to the deepest levels of human knowledge. The brief flowering of *The Spirit of Romance* thus looks forward to the Confucian vision of organic natural order in the *Cantos*, the aesthetic crusade to found a *paradiso terrestre* in the art and wisdom of the past and, pedagogically linked to both, the irresistible lure of that Roman microphone.

On the other hand, this reading fails to take into account the undercurrent of irony that troubles the portrait from "operantics" through to its final "drawls". And that the quest was ultimately absurd, the dream of an incorrigibly romantic tilter of windmills intent on saving the world through a resurrection of lost causes, is left as a residue of doubt in Mahon's poem as it is in Pound's.

### III

Politics, the war, and the artist's troubled relationship with them move to central stage for the final portrait, that of Wyndham Lewis. Abrasive, truculent and contentious, a much darker figure than either of his contemporaries, Lewis is the least knowable of the three. This has much to do with his habitual role-playing, for Lewis was the consummate self-dramatist and performance is the key to his career. His art likewise inhered in the epidermis, and his cool exteriorized approach to human portraiture, whether on canvas or in his literary works, ran completely counter to the emerging modernist orthodoxies.<sup>13)</sup> Mahon emulates this art of elusive surfaces and projects Lewis, as Lewis enjoyed projecting himself, through a series of hostile poses which totally mask the inner man.

Mahon identifies immediately the dangerously subversive image

Lewis cultivated for his person and his art. But the incident itself, Lewis's placing of

A pearl-handled revolver  
On the white table-cloth

at a 1917 luncheon party for the Prince of Wales, remains ambiguous.<sup>14)</sup> For the wealthy socialites who commissioned his paintings, iconoclasm was a vital part of Lewis's mystique; for Prime Minister Asquith, pearl-handled revolvers and artistic coups had more sinister implications: the memory of Sarajevo was still fresh. The incident thus neatly registers a desperate ambivalence in the experimental arts of the period, while Asquith's "Anarchy masquerading / As art" provides a contemporary perspective on the Lewis paradox.

The climate of oncoming war had brought an increased sense of urgency to avant-garde art movements across Europe and a new note of stridency to the rhetoric of their manifestos. *Blast* (1914-15), the Vorticist review which Lewis edited, carried both tendencies to their logical extreme in the shock tactics it employed to clear the ground for Britain's first abstract art movement.<sup>15)</sup> However, it also owes its place in the mythology of the period to the way its brief aesthetic bombardment, answered within a month by the guns of Europe, brought the era to an end.

Lewis enlisted in the Royal Artillery and trained as a gunner. Then, as a junior officer in a howitzer battery, he saw action in a bloody series of battles culminating in the bloodiest of all, at Passchendaele. Mahon draws on Lewis's record of these front-line experiences, his 1937 memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering*, for the

Vorticist warscape of stanza four:<sup>16)</sup>

A moonscape, trees like gibbets,  
Shrapnel, wire, the thud  
Of howitzers, spike-helmeted  
Skeletons in the mud.

This resolves the exquisitely posed menace of the bijou revolver into the reality of violence and effects Lewis's transition from aesthetic polemicist to fighting man, one who with typical bravado enjoyed vaunting his indifference and lightheartedness before the sights and sounds of battle.<sup>17)</sup> He is thus glimpsed as

The *monstre gai* in a vortex  
Of 'stone laughing'—<sup>18)</sup>

Mahon refuses to ameliorate this ostensible cold-bloodedness into an emotional discipline. Rather, by projecting it in terms that recall Lewis's work as a writer and painter, he again confronts us with a paradox as field officer merges imperceptibly into artist, observation post into the still place at the heart of the vortex of experience,<sup>19)</sup> and monstrous gaiety into the detachment and inner repose the artist must necessarily cultivate if he is to transmute that experience into art. Appropriately, the horrifying scene he looks out on has already assumed its final artistic form.

"War artist" in stanza 5 broadens from its specific reference (the 1918-19 government art commissions which released Lewis from front-line service) to the intellectual battlefield that dominated his post-war career. The opening salvos of this metaphoric war are

directed at the Dublin born painter, Sir William Orpen, whose portraits of the British military commanders kowtowed unashamedly to the official discourses and pieties. In contrast, Lewis's two huge war canvases, *A Canadian Gun Pit* and *A Battery Shelled*, exude a fierce integrity of vision which issues from a clear perception of the tragic moment they record. The war had an immediate effect on both painters' lives. For Orpen, it fostered a lucrative post-war career as a society painter, while for Lewis, starved now of patronage and recognition, it meant abandoning portrait painting altogether and earning his meagre bread thereafter by his writing. Reflecting, in the wake of the war, on the situation for fine art, Lewis likened the half-dozen artists still worthy of the name to "representatives of a submerged civilization" like the Aztecs or the Atlantans. This sense of himself as one of a select group of emissaries from a more enlightened age intensified under the misunderstanding and neglect which was to meet his work over the next twenty years.

Though his contempt ran deeper, Lewis chose to stay where Ford and Pound could no longer remain. His substitute exile was an internal affair:<sup>20)</sup>

Holed up in Holland Park,  
Practises an implacable  
Ordnance of the body  
And casts out the soul.

The military echoes point to the continuing role the war played in Lewis's imagination deep into the 1920s. It is natural to assume from anecdotes about his obsession with enemies, the fortress-like

impenetrability of his studio, and the general belligerence of his behaviour in the immediate post-war years that, traumatized by his experiences at the front, Lewis had fallen victim to some form of post-stress paranoia. However, several of these stories suggest that Lewis's behaviour, even at its strangest, had a great deal of method in it, a view shared by his biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, and endorsed here by Mahon's word "Practises". Meyers cites *The Code of a Herdsman* (1917) to confirm the central place of dissimulation in Lewis's artistic credo and, by inference, in his later career.<sup>21</sup> In this tract Lewis argues, with an obvious debt to Nietzsche, that the artist, the herdsman of the title, has an inherent superiority to the vulgar masses and must dwell alone on imaginary precipices, resisting the ever encroaching contamination of the herd and the debased currents of contemporary thought, while presenting a consistently hostile stance towards the world (compare "implacable / Ordnance of the body"). But Lewis then goes further, questioning the nature of identity itself by insisting that the artist avoids the "vulgarity of being or assuming [him]self to be one ego" and recommending instead that he cultivates the outward guises of six different personalities. His armour forged in the modernist crucible of the persona, Lewis's creative superman thus found in the aggressive masks of the twenties and his master role as the Enemy in the thirties the perfect means of holding a corrupted and corrupting world at bay.

If "casts out the soul" places a psychic cost on such perilous acts of self creation, it also recalls the tendency in Lewis's art to exteriorize the human being into an automaton totally divorced from any animating spirit. However, where the geometrical figures of his early Vorticist works evoked the mechanical spirit of the new cen-

tury ("Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the modern world"),<sup>22)</sup> the exteriorizing later became a tool for excoriating the mindless emptiness of post-war existence. Failing to convince his age of the right of the intellect to take command in the cultural crisis, Lewis now sat in judgement on it: satire was to be his new *métier*.

Unfortunately, his first venture in the genre, *The Apes of God* (1930), served only to confirm his reputation as a malicious and dangerous nihilist, alienate friends, and deepen his intellectual isolation. Subtitled *A Modern Dunciad* (Lewis aimed to revitalize the long dormant tradition of English satire), the work lashes at the degeneracy of post-war Britain with the *saeva indignatio* of a Swift more than the judicious anger of its model. His ape-dunces are mindless and derivative imitators of the self-begotten artist ("Adam versus the Broad Church of received opinion"), and Lewis ranges the literary cults and fashions of the day for his targets. His most corrosive satire, however, is reserved for the Bloomsbury group and the Sitwells, long-standing enemies whom Lewis sneered at as "champagne Bohemia". Mahon's substitute metonym is "cocoa" with its glance at privileged routines and drowse-inducing dulness and, antithetically paired with "Vitriol", its unmistakable hint of satiric overkill.<sup>23)</sup>

*The Apes of God* set Lewis on a downhill road to pariahdom and despair. A year later, he brought out his ill-timed book, *Hitler* (1931), which obtusely characterised the Führer as a peace-loving friend of Britain. And not content with one miscalculation, Lewis continued to serve up evidence of his fascist sympathies, provoking a reaction in leftward-leaning Britain that was as swift as it was predictable. First, the portrait commissions dried up and friends crossed

the street. Then came the libel suits, the interminable quarrels with publishers, the crippling debt, while illness and exhaustion kept pace with the outer corrosion. But the final humiliation was yet to come in the war's extension of a transatlantic trip into "Six years of Canadian/ Exile". The long delayed night crossing was on a one way ticket to "psychic defeat".

#### IV

The bleak retrospective which heads the final section is laden with portents of the end of history. Ghostly bugles sound the last post at the funeral rites of Edwardian civilization.<sup>24)</sup> The last fox has gone to ground beneath the menacing shadow of a nuclear power plant whose "whirling radar dishes/ Anxious and vehement" await an apocalyptic visitation from the skies. The empire fragments; the creative urge defects. Evolution rewinds to a primal dust. The final glimpse of a post-history where man's (or at least creative man's) brief hegemony over this planet has come to an end:

Only the chimps remain;  
The rest is dust

gives a millenarian edge to Lewis's pessimism.

If this amounts to historical despair, the speaker manages yet to provide affirmation in the creative stocktaking that follows:

Tragic? No, 'available  
Reality' was increased,  
The sacred flame kept alive,

The Muse not displeased;

where the potentially redeeming forces of an imaginatively extended reality have assured artistic continuity, if nothing else. It is Mahon's distinctive gift to balance finely on a knife's edge of irony as he brings values into focus, and here the ironic tone and obliqueness of the argument (its referent remains ambiguous until the next stanza) manage to sow seeds of doubt without undermining that affirmation. Further complicating our response are echoes of Pound's disillusioned retrospective, "E. P. Ode pour l'Élection de son Sepulchre", whose ironic epitaph on a poet who wrote in defiance of the canons of his time provides not only the model but the vindicative agenda of Mahon's lines:

Unaffected by 'the march of events',  
 He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentiesme*,  
*De son eage*; the case presents  
 No adjunct to the Muses' diadem.

Underlying the ironies here and in Mahon's stanza is the same deep-rooted concern with artistic failure and the wasted life. In Mahon's case, this is coloured by a profound scepticism about the purpose of artistic enterprise in an increasingly homogeneous and hostile world and by particular misgivings about his own "dying art" of poetry. That one day, perhaps, his "words will find their mark / And leave a brief glow on the dark"<sup>25</sup> remains a distant hope. For any more direct affirmation, he is obliged to don the iron's mask.

All that remains is to add the final touches to the portraits. Mahon's record of his protagonists' ends, while still resisting a tragic



*gravitas*, is the more moving for the stark restraint of its rendering. Ford dies abroad, relegated to the margins of literary history. Lewis's nemesis is blindness, which he meets with Miltonic courage and stoicism.<sup>26</sup> "Eyeless in Notting Hill", he comes to terms with his self-destructive nature and emotional shortcomings like Milton's hero Samson, and in *Self Condemned*, a novel written in darkness and based on his war-time experiences in Canada, makes a final act of atonement. Pound, newly "released" from purgatory, reads to his grandchildren, helps with the chores, then "dozes off in a high silence of the Alps".

Mahon modulates to pianissimo for his exquisitely poised and moving close:

*Un rameur*, finally,  
*Sur le fleuve des morts*,  
Poling his profile toward  
What farther shore?

There are muted recollections here of Mauberley's vigourless "art in profile", his doomed and purposeless drifting and oar-inscribed epitaph. However, Mahon's Pound is an altogether more purposeful mariner than his Mauberleian counterpart, and the optimism of his continuing search holds out a lingering hope that opposes the sceptical currents of Mahon's poem. Pound's ongoing quest across the infernal river has also a special resonance for a writer who, like his modernist predecessor, sees homelessness as the essential condition of his role as poet, and for whom the image of the night crossing is the signifier both of exile and of creative release:

Sometime before  
 spring I found in there  
 the frequency I had been looking for

and crossed by night  
 a dark channel, my eyesight  
 focused upon a flickering pier-light.

(“Craigvara House”)

Needless to say, in Pound’s case there is neither a pier-light to guide him nor assurance of a farther shore. However, the stanza’s deepest ironies gather about Jean Cocteau’s description of him as “*un rameur sur le fleuve des morts*”. For if Pound seems strangely at home poling his way across the river of death, it owes less to his experience as a bird of passage than to the fact that, as both a poet and scholar, he “never loved anything living as he...loved the dead”.<sup>27)</sup> For Mahon, with his continuing doubts about the value and purpose of his craft in a world where poetry is now “obsolete bumph”, it is a chastening reminder as he packs for his own night crossing of the elusiveness of that farther shore of artistic relevance.

## NOTES

- 1) The works referred to in this paragraph are:  
*Night-Crossing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).  
*A Kensington Notebook* (London: Anvil Press, 1984).  
*Antarctica* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1986).  
*Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books/Gallery in association with Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 2) From Michael Hofmann’s “The recent generations at their song”, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 30, 1986.

- 3) *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)*, in Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).
- 4) Mahon wrote "Going Home" in 1977 sometime before his departure for Northern Ireland to take up a temporary post at the New University at Coleraine. The poem's tree by tree farewell to Mahon's former Sussex home sets up an interesting interpretive relationship with its neighbouring poem.
- 5) In "Death and the Sun", Mahon draws explicit parallels between himself and Albert Camus, and between the political situation in Northern Ireland and the content of Camus's novels.
- 6) From Hugh Kenner's essay "*Mauberley*", reprinted in *Ezra Pound: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Walter Sutton (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963) p.49.
- 7) Typical Mahonian telescoping. "Toy soldiers" comprehends the heroes of Ford's pre-war and post-war novels (though only *The Good Soldier* belongs to the South Lodge years) while likewise conflating *tabula rasa* and cultural holocaust.
- 8) The stanza approximates in content to Pound's poems IV and V and echoes:

frankness as never before,  
disillusions as never told in the old days,  
hysterias, trench confessions,  
laughter out of dead bellies.
- 9) Patricia Hutchins, *Ezra Pound's Kensington: An Exploration 1885-1913* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965).
- 10) *Ibid*, p.19.
- 11) Quoted from a reminiscence by Pound. *Ibid*, p.83
- 12) *The Spirit of Romance* was based on a course of lectures Pound gave at the London Polytechnic in 1909-10 entitled "The Development of Literature in Southern Europe".
- 13) Lewis's passionate belief that "good art must have no inside" (*Tarr*), made him a natural adversary of the interior and subjective trends prevalent in his day. Lewis is an intriguing example of a highly innovative writer with a set of priorities almost opposite to those of other modernists.
- 14) For the fullest account of the incident see Peter Quennell, *The Sign of*

- the Fish* (London, 1960) p.136. Lewis's hostess on the occasion was not the Countess of Drogheda, who gave Lewis a commission to decorate her dining room in a Vorticist style in the pre-war years, but Lady Cunard.
- 15) The polemical style and format of *Blast* obviously owe much to Guillaume Apollinaire's futurist proclamation *L'Antitradition futuriste* (1913) and to Filippo Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914).
  - 16) "...Beyond this battery was a short stretch of shell-pitted nothingness—for we had entered upon that arid and blistering vacuum; the lunar landscape, so often described in the war-novels and represented by dozens of painters and draughtsmen, myself among them, but the particular quality of which it is so difficult to convey. Those grinning skeletons in field-grey, the skull still protected by the metal helmet; those festoons of mud-caked wire; those miniature mountain ranges of saffron earth, and trees like gibbets—these were the properties only of those titanic casts of dying and shell-shocked actors, who charged this stage with a romantic electricity." From Chapter IV, "A Day of Attack", *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: John Calder, 1982) pp.131-2.
  - 17) Lewis throws light on his attitude towards the war in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (pp.7-8), where he describes how he callously flung himself "into trigonometry and ballistics as light-heartedly as Leonardo did, when he designed siege-sledges for the Florentine General Staff".
  - 18) The phrase "*monstre gai*" alludes to the title of the second work in Lewis's *The Human Age* trilogy (*The Childermass* (1928), *Monstre Gai* (1955) and *Malign Fiesta* (1956)), to the source of this title in Voltaire's line "Un monstre gai vaut mieux qu'un sentimental ennuyeux", and to the morally ambiguous Bailiff of Lewis's trilogy. The Bailiff administers over the dead in a Purgatorial no-man's-land on the fringes of Heaven.
  - 19) Lewis explained the nature of the vortex to Violet Hunt in the following terms: "You think of a whirlpool. At the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent place where all the energy is concentrated. And there at the point of concentration is the Vorticist." Quoted from Annamaria Sala, "Some Notes on Vorticism and Futurism" in *Agenda* (7-8, Autumn-Winter, 1969-70) p.158. There is perhaps a further allusion to the foreword Lewis wrote for the catalogue of the "Cubist Room" exhibition, December 1913: "All revolutionary painting today has in common the rigid reflections of steel and stone in the spirit of the artist." Quoted

- from Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971) p.431.
- 20) In *Blasting and Bombardiering* (p.5), Lewis refers to 1919-26 as an underground period in which he "first buried and then disinterred" himself. Mahon merges Lewis's burial image into one of trench warfare in "Holed up".
  - 21) Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) pp. 108-9.
  - 22) From the second number of *Blast*, July 1915.
  - 23) Compare T. S. Eliot's judgement: "Mr. Lewis, the most brilliant journalist of my generation (in addition to his other gifts) often squanders his genius for invective upon objects which to everyone but himself seem unworthy of his artillery, and arrays howitzers against card-houses". Quoted from Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis*, p.182.
  - 24) The allusion is to a key moment in Ford's *No More Parades*: Tietjens' recollection of the symbolically charged ceremonial at a last pre-war military parade.
  - 25) From Mahon's poem "The Sea in Winter".
  - 26) Lewis compared his blindness to Milton's in "The Sea-Mists of the Winter" (*Listener*, 10 May 1951), where he expressed the desire to go on fighting to the end like the hero of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Both artists were blinded by the pressure of a pituitary tumour on the optic nerve.
  - 27) From Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1993) p. 69. Here Lewis argues that Pound "should not be taken seriously as a living being at all. Life is not his true concern, his gifts are all turned in the other direction. "In his chosen or fated field he bows to no one," to use his own words. But his field is purely that of *the dead*. As the *nature mortist*, or painter essentially of still life, deals for preference with life-that-is-still, that has not much life, so Ezra for preference consorts with the dead, whose life is preserved for us in books and pictures. He has never loved anything living as he has loved the dead". Cocteau's line is based on Lewis's stricture.