THE AESTHETIC OF THE IRISH LYRIC:
W.B. YEATS AND DEREK MAHON

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis shows how the lyric is the chosen poetic mode in the mature work of W.B. Yeats and is a symbolism whose influence is shown in the work of Derek Mahon. The lyric grants freedom from representation, by showing that the priority of its discourse or aesthetic is ensured through the resistance of ‘nature’ that is implied in the poetic genre. Therefore, this is what the lyric imparts: the aesthetic emotion that defines the poetic medium. This awareness of what the lyric is suggests a complex interaction with reality. Yeats, in particular, demonstrates the epistemological crisis of the lyric as being embodied in aesthetic discourse. Therefore, he shows the importance of the consideration of the very language of the lyric – beyond its representation within a dogmatic understanding of tradition present in the idea of the Romantic lyric. For Mahon, the mode of feeling that the lyric represents proposes a case for, or defense of, the eternal character of poetry. As such, it is threatened by its history as much as the Romantic lyric was by ‘nature,’ through which Mahon appears to discern the crisis of contemporary poetry in the need to establish a reason for the continuation of the poetic tradition. The ‘Irish lyric,’ then, stands for the respective poets’s commitment to the lyric form in their work, whose implications in terms of theme or subject matter are considered in this dissertation. I am concerned with the conditions for an aesthetic of the ‘Irish lyric,’ as seen in these poets who represent it, against a pressing political reality that is both within and without for the modern or contemporary poet.
For Dad and Mum.

‘Dark clouds rained through great expanse’
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


CW *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*


Literature is not simply a matter of a writer being in exile from reality, but of reality that is in exile from itself. For both W.B. Yeats and Derek Mahon, the personal crisis in their respective histories is closely tied to the work of the lyric – a dimension of feeling or signification that is ideally beyond speech. I discuss in Chapter One a mythological dimension of lyrical meaning or ‘speech’ that Yeats applies to the ‘written’ medium – and also more indirectly to the literary tradition that informs his work, particularly from Responsibilities (1914) onwards. Chapter Two examines the ideal aesthetic goal of each of Mahon’s collections from The Hudson Letter onwards. In Chapter Three, I particularly consider what is significant in Mahon’s very well-received 2005 collection, Harbour Lights in comparison with the lyrical mode in Yeats that survives the loss of eternal beauty. Myth is a resource that Mahon gives the term “River of Stars” in An Autumn Wind (2009). Precisely in this way, his poems offer a more flexible medium of expression, as Mahon’s New Collected Poems (2011) illustrates, a field of mythology in place of a system of vision that Yeats continues to represent. His primary theme, as I read Mahon’s poems to register, is the possibility of ‘further’ contexts of creation which the pastoral tradition problematises. A living myth of speech for Yeats meant equating art with something that it aspires towards, a symbol that requires contexts created, and even borrowed, from the past. In Chapter Four, I analyse the myth of ‘automatic writing’ in relation to the ‘Irish lyric,’ and the critical context of ‘musical’ eloquence, in relation to Yeats and Mahon respectively. The conclusion emphasises how reading Mahon against Yeats illustrates a cycle of history that an ‘Irish writer’ is inherently part of, through the form of the lyric as “an argument with ourselves.”
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines an aesthetic framework for reading the ‘lyric’ through an engagement with the myth of nature or post-romantic history, in the work of W.B. Yeats and Derek Mahon. The problems inherent in such a framework include how nature in each poet is not firstly a mode of identification with a particular theme or subject. Instead, the symbolism that ‘Nature’ implies belongs to an examination of the relationship of the poet to his medium of representation, as it transpires in these Irish poets. Although belonging to different generations, they each exemplify the interrogation of Irish literary history through their respective contributions to the symbolism of Irish art. Instead of the nostalgia of the past, ‘Nature’ represents an innovation of the poetic medium in relation to its tradition. In this way, for Mahon, poetry, as a symbol of its own making, becomes a means of identifying the myth of the ‘modern’ poet in relation to the contemporary canon. My thesis argues how the personality of a modern poet shares with the verbal artist a search for eloquence in relation to an examination of his primary medium, of speech. However, this requires the negotiation of ‘Nature’ or a participation in a version of poetic history that I argue Yeats makes possible. For this purpose, I will consider the themes of personality, eloquence, beauty and symbolism, as they each impose a pattern of lyrical history, and a mode of imagination, that continues into the twenty-first century.

The motivation behind the creation of a common literary imagination reveals an ambition shared by Yeats and Mahon alike. In this way, I show how the sublime prose of nature or history forms a guide to the creative expression of artistic goals in the aftermath of Romantic history. My thesis suggests a way of exploring sources of inspiration that emphasise the importance of aesthetic reflection in poets as diverse as
Yeats and Mahon. The poets each show us how a great lyrical artist aspires to no lesser goal than that art feeds the soul, whose sanctity is found in art and beauty, rather than in the imitation of the natural or visible world.

Reading both poets suggests the importance of the interior life in all its forms contained in the idea of the lyric that is explored in each poet’s work. Whether this medium of feeling translates into an interpretative history that extends to their personal lives is less important than the evidence of the poets’s respective engagements with the lyric shown in both poetry and prose. What one discovers finally in the lyric is a, potentially, most complex medium of thought whose role in the shaping of the literary forms of the modern world by both Yeats and Mahon. The lyric forms the basis of a different life altogether. Its ‘work’ and ‘medium’ are manifest, as I argue, at a specific moment in Yeats’s literary career, which I show in relation to *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). The lyric is important for reading Mahon in relation to his interest in the literary arts, one that has deepened in his more recent collections, beginning with *Harbour Lights* (2005).

An image of Irish art emerges as a sign of the lyric for a modern world, as evident in Yeats’s later work. As Chapter One shows, it consists of sources that are familiar, yet ‘new,’ in relation to the achievement of the poet’s artistic goals. The connection to its medium, which Chapter Two shows, is available in Mahon through a particular mood belonging to the resistance of reality. The modes available to the lyrical tradition include the pastoral, as I discuss it in Chapter Three. I compare Yeats’s and Mahon’s respective understanding of Romantic history and its dialectical tradition of nature and beauty, and its impact on artistic creation. Chapter Four demonstrates that modernity alone does not ensure the impersonality of art. The thesis
is concerned with the role of the poet in relation to myths like ‘Nature’ that transforms our understanding of the lyric – as the key to a truly ‘poetic’ mode of representation.

Key to reading Yeats as a prominent figure in modernist poetics is the investigation of aesthetic form, a subject of great interest in poetry, and more broadly so, in Irish literature. As Mahon writes in “MacNeice in England and Ireland,” “The time is coming fast, if it isn’t already here, when the question, ‘Is So-and-So really an Irish writer?’ will clear a room in seconds” (qtd. in McCormack, *Burke to Beckett* 2).

In both poets, there is an inherent desire for a theory of feeling whose presence problematises the exclusion of a subject in modern poetry. Felt with more intensity by Yeats, the central problem of the modern lyric is that the twentieth-century poet was deprived of a rational explanation for lyrical feeling. Therefore, the modern lyric promises not just the eradication of external forms of identification, but also the necessity of its forms of mythology.

While Mahon has been read as grappling with tradition as a conflict brought about by Northern Irish history, his work is also influenced by a broader understanding of Irish history as constructed through Yeats, where the question of the conflict for an Irish artist began, as I argue, with the Romantic understanding of self and the imagination. This resulted in the treatment of a more dramatic lyrical subject, as we shall see. Yeats had written his book, *Autobiographies*, not primarily as a personal reflection on his life that had passed; rather, it was a way of reflecting the importance of the search for a literary mask. The symbolism of Yeats’s theory of the ‘mask’ is the pursuit of a form that suggests that the written canon no longer offered exemplary images for poetry. Yet, Yeats’s essays demonstrate how Blake, Shelley and Spenser each point to the purely symbolic relations belonging to the poetic
medium. In different ways, these poets observe something more than a mode of thinking belonging to the notion of Romantic feeling.

Yeats’s mask is an illustration of the ultimate destination of lyrical art, which finds itself reflected in Mahon’s Harbour Lights (2005) as the poet’s very image on the written page. Mahon’s interest in the symbolic relations of art and reality, as I argue, belongs to an aspiration of the literary life and thought of a poet whom Yeats exemplifies to Irish writers. Yeats’s mask, whose appearance and more dramatic forms of his lyrical self in his later work are exemplified by Mahon’s work both thematically and stylistically. Furthermore, these forms that show the mastery of Yeats’s later prose are found as an expression of ‘Nature’ or the ‘beautiful,’ as proven by his readings of the three major Romantic poets, and which I argue enters his lyrical work in The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933).

The particular role of Yeats’s mask in relation to the “beautiful” brought a direct challenge to the “dogma” of “printed criticism” (E&I 239) whose opinions he frequently rejected. However, unlike the way poetry is an anti-political vehicle for Mahon, a Northern Irish poet, the ultimate object of poetry for Yeats was an escape from political thought, as opposed to ideas. The preoccupations with personality, eloquence, beauty and symbolism began in the nineteenth century, and were firstly sparked by the instability of the idea of personality in relation to the artist. It represents a respect for a concept that brings attention to the environment and thought of an artist in the modern world, which has been described in Richard Sennett’s The Fall of Public Man (1976). His study suggests that the formation of the imaginative life of a Romantic artist, and consequently romantic feeling, has to take into account the breaking down of the notion of society in the nineteenth century. Sennett’s objective stated in the book is “to create a theory of expression in public by a process
of interplay between history and theory” (6) which does not simply describe the changes that took place in that age, or only for its own sake.

The book states that the nineteenth century stood for a prophetic era of “complete social and cognitive disaster” (22) related to the thesis of “personality”; yet, it is also an idea that evokes the elusive goal of “a theory of expression.” Sennett will be able to combine the inevitability of the “history” he describes with the necessary elusiveness of “theory,” a combination that may be compared with the “historical sense” found in the mind of an individual artist, as described in T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” As such, an artist needed “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Sacred Wood 49), an impression of a historical climate which is fading away, in the presence of what Sennett calls “unstable symbols of impulse and intention” (309) belonging to the incomplete symbolisation of the personal vision of an artist from the “mid-19th Century” onwards (27).

The following statement that Eliot makes in the essay suggests an engagement with a similar understanding of history as the one discussed in Sennett’s book, even if it is primarily about the nineteenth century: “The poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (56). Therefore, it is not just that a poet “has” a personality, but the fact that it is strived for, that becomes important in the twentieth century. Therefore, “personality” in Sennett’s study suggests a more endemic subjectivity that translated into an “obsession with selfhood” (17) in the absence of a more traditional structure of society, or what he designates as “an Order of Nature” (150).
It was because of the disappearance of such an order belonging to an individual in society that, according to Sennett, the very purpose of “personality” takes over from “Nature,” as “a doctrine of secular immanence” (150) which in Eliot’s essay is described as “the whole existing order” toward which “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art [. . . ] are readjusted (Sacred Wood 50). In this way, there is the danger that “personality” may acquire, using Yeats’s language in A Vision (1925, 1937), a ‘false mask.’ As Sennett says, “When personality entered the public realm, the identity of the public man split in two” (195). A ‘true mask,’ therefore, is able to recognise that what “seemed real” was only “in and of itself” (150). What “personality” represents, then, from the middle of the nineteenth century is a medium of expression, but only, as Sennett’s study shows us, where it is a challenge to the scientific positivism of an earlier century.

An important aspect of Sennett’s theory of “the concept of expression as the presentation of emotion” is that the detail of its “emotion” is secondary – as emotions that serve to make us feel something or other, and which are directed towards an object. It is a twentieth century perspective of “personality” as being inherently antithetical that both Eliot and Sennett attempt to preserve. For Eliot, it is implied in his “analogy . . . of the catalyst” (Sacred Wood 54) belonging to artistic thought and feeling. For Sennett, his analogy lies in the importance of a “public actor” who shows that the centrality of “emotion” as expressive of feeling demonstrates that it is at one remove from society (107). From the eighteenth century onwards, it is embodied in “the actor deprived of the art of acting” (314). Nothing is hidden, in other words, but therefore a true artist emerges as a result the object of ‘feeling’ that is his medium of expression. As Sennett says, the “actor” fully inhabits his role when “the experiencing
of human nature during the course of a lifetime is replaced by the search for a
selfhood” (314).

The concept of “a selfhood” continues to be influential to Irish art, as well as
to reading the potential of Yeats’s mask in relation to his later symbolism. Romantic
thought continued to be useful to Yeats, in the way the Irish dialect was a source of
inspiration as well. However, in both cases, they were a ‘mere’ resource, for what
they signified was a discovery of what Yeats called ‘written speech’ (“Upon a House
shaken by the Land Agitation” 11) – or, a form of ‘speech’ that builds on a writer’s
particular understanding of it. As Oona Frawley notes in *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia
and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, nature takes a different form in Yeats’s work,
apart from its abstraction as a symbol. Art is a process, and which is found as an
engagement with “the past,” as Frawley puts it simply, a key observation that
connects Yeats’s work to the resources of the Irish literary imagination. By the end of
the 1890s, as Oona Frawley says, “the Irish literary past ha[d] established a firmer
grip on [Yeats’s] imagination” (72).

The passing away of the rhetoric of nature from the Romantic aesthetic was
emphasised by Arthur Symons in his introduction to *The Romantic Movement in
English Poetry*. Symons made reference to Baudelaire in *The Symbolist Movement in
Literature*, who had written that: “The study of nature often leads to a result quite
different from nature” (*Selected Writings* 57). Symons had dedicated *The Symbolist
Movement in Literature* to Yeats, published at the turn of the century – originally
named *The Decadent Movement in Literature* – to the only reader he needed for the
symbolic aspirations of the book to be fulfilled. For Symons, Yeats was that ideal
combination of “personality” and symbol. Symons had alluded to the possibility of
the continual involvement of Romantic thought beyond that of its poets.
Sennett argues that there is no adequate expression of art, or at least, one able to influence the wider community: “From all that has been said of the effects of immanence and immanent personality, it is easily seen that the public man might feel more comfortable as a witness to someone else’s expression than as an active conveyor of expression himself” (195). Just like how Sennett’s study, then, depends on the idea of a “concept,” “the act of conception” for Susanne K. Langer is only ever ideal and is never just “what is conceived.” Expression is in the first place only discovered as the myth of a process Langer calls “symbolisation” (*PNK* 64f). In fact, we could read Sennett’s study as demonstrating the impossibility of what Yeats had called in his *Autobiographies* “true Unity of Being” (*Aut* 355), but therefore showing the contribution of Yeats’s concept to twentieth-century art.

According to Mahon, a theory of beauty may only be able to accessed by an artist through the impossibility of “selfhood,” whereas Yeats addresses it in *Vision* as a problem inherent in the concept. To do this, he frees the concept from the medium of thought, and in this way, like Langer’s “act of conception,” the idea of “selfhood” becomes precisely a way to preserve the medium of expression for a writer. If “personality” is the search for a medium, it is nonetheless never going to be, according to Yeats’s *Vision*, “the Whole objectively perceived” (*AV* 88). The very basis of thought and expression is a puzzle. Likewise, the artist is constrained to the very notion of “human nature” which is, at the same time, without representation in relation to his art.

The predicament of “personality” may be addressed, as Denis Donoghue does in *Speaking of Beauty* (2003), through the impossibility of “a body of work that stands free of its personal circumstances” (177). There is, as Langer implies, the possibility that there is something aside from the path of imitation for an artist – and which is
made possible by the presence of “symbolisation” in the creative process. Although the genuine artist distances himself from the idea of “personality,” as Eliot shows us in his essay, it does not explain how a poet comes to initiate a style much less undermine one.

Therefore, what “impersonality” preserves is the existence of an implied system of eloquence necessary for a modern, objective style which concerns this dissertation. In On Eloquence (2008), Donoghue presents a language for speaking of style in the same way that the “presentation of emotion” in Sennett’s theory became essential in relation to the process of recovery to a notion of sincerity. For this to happen, Sennett achieves a delicate balance of history and nature through a structure that he creates by contrasting the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the eighteenth century. Yeats’s theory of the mask, however, demonstrates how “eloquence” is an ideal system that identifies art and reality in a single thought, whether possible or otherwise.

We will see that “eloquence,” a word that distinguishes itself, according to Donoghue, from the language of style used in society, may be read to be the stroke of genius that Yeats’s mask performs in relation to his later work. It is also the very factor, as my thesis argues, that sets the poets apart. Mahon sees the problem of style as the problem of “personality” present in a writer, and that is achieved where literary styles are found to be in conflict, while eloquence is the embodiment of an ideal that Yeats represents in Vision precisely from an understanding of that conflict – that is, through the realisation or recognition that ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone’ (“September 1913” 7, 15, 23). Yet, for this reason, Mahon’s collection, An Autumn Wind (2011), inevitably aspires to the “personality” belonging to a visionary system created by an individual artist – despite being absent for him, as this dissertation
argues. Therefore, the eloquence embodied in such a “personality” that Mahon calls ‘a spinning centre’ (“A Building Site” 41) in An Autumn Wind is only achievable as a purely aesthetic achievement. Yet, its critique needs the creativity of Harbour Lights, as I argue, whereas The Hudson Letter (1996) simply demonstrates that such a system is unable to be demonstrated for an Irish artist, whom Yeats illustrated in the collection.

Eliot’s description of “a continual extinction of personality” (Sacred Wood 53) is precisely a formula of how poetry may still impact on the present particularly for an artist conscious of tradition – and whose lofty ideal ‘Yeatsian form’ epitomises. What the phases of Yeats’s “Great Wheel” in Vision anticipate is the complex movement or thinking that show that “personality” is an occurrence in the only way perhaps that the lives of artists could be significant. Eloquence is an art form that, at its most ideal, is in equal measure a publicly known voice (nature) and a privately discovered symbol (beauty). Yet, this was to the complete exclusion of a soul, as seen in Phase Fifteen of “The Phases of the Moon.” As Donoghue says in On Eloquence, “It is commonly assumed that eloquence is a form or a subset of rhetoric, a means to rhetorical ends. That is not true. Rhetoric has an aim, to move people to do one thing rather than another” (3). Therefore, when Yeats wrote his introduction to Vision, rather late in his career, to describe its “arbitrary, harsh, difficult symbolism” (AV 23), it was to create a mask or “personality” that was precisely unfamiliar to readers. Indeed, it is in relation to its ‘realism’ that his mask continues to be controversial for Mahon.

The precise import of Yeats’s system which becomes elusive in Mahon’s work is found as an understanding of the role of “negation” (AV 88) in the creation of expression that Yeats continues to embody for poets after him as his ‘mask.’ The problem that Yeats poses for poets after him is precisely through the failure of Vision
to have a direct impact on Irish art after him, but there was a greater triumph for Yeats, as I argue, found in “a hundred per cent symbolic” (*F&F* 59) “Nature” which the very *fact* of his mask is playfully suggestive of.

Like the influence of drama on Yeats’s later work, the language of his introduction to *Vision* is an important clue to his intended ambition of rewriting an entire tradition of beauty as our ‘modern hope’ (line 11) in “Ego Dominus Tuus” (“I am your master”). As I argue, this ‘modern hope’ is implied in his vision of “a new naturalism” (*CW5* 109) whose source explains the intensity of the symbolism of feeling in Yeats, and the importance of myth to the significance of formal play in Mahon’s work. By reading Yeats alongside Mahon, one discovers that there is an implicit reward for his labouring in *Vision*, for his individual gyres in the “Great Wheel” demonstrate the very idea of “selfhood” that was problematic for Romantic artists like Blake before him.

Yeats sought a different engagement with beauty as his main subject matter, one that may be perfected through a “quarrel with ourselves” (*CW5* 8). More than that, better than his compatriots, Yeats had understood the potential harm that an ‘image’ could cause as a representation or “symbolisation” of a personal vision. The very idea or concept of beauty that is unconsumed by passion, therefore, continues to be beyond the reach of artists like Mahon. As I argue, this is precisely demonstrable through Yeats’s mask of ‘nature’ in his later work which, as Frawley tells us, “go[es] far beyond the merely national or concrete: representative of Maud Gonne, of the goal of Irish nationhood, the rose becomes an aggregate symbol, a *symbol of the symbolic itself*” (72; emphasis added).

As I will discuss in Chapter One, the Romantic canon – including Blake, Shelley and Spenser, as his essays indicate – continued to influence Yeats. In a review
of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, he had remarked that: “. . . unlike Blake, isolated by an arbitrary symbolism, [Shelley] seemed to sum up all that was metaphysical in English poetry” (*E&I* 424). Shelley’s symbolism for “Nature” suggested that the idea of tradition included all subsequent responses, or reactions to it. However, Blake’s “arbitrary symbolism” was precisely the challenge that Yeats makes a note of in his introduction to *Vision*, as Blake is evidence of Yeats’s intent to re-interpret Romantic history, as the development of Blake’s antithetical mask. When Yeats wrote in his essay on “Bishop Berkeley” that: “The romantic movement with its turbulent heroism, its self-assertion, is over, superseded by a new naturalism that leaves man helpless before the contents of his own mind” (*CW5* 109), he was both announcing a new medium, as well as reintroducing an older understanding of ‘personality.’

In Chapter Two, I will consider how Mahon transforms the dogmatic point of view of nature through a theme that binds his different collections together; a theme moreover whose ‘straw spaces’ (“Harbour Lights” 29) become the basis of the creativity and originality of his style. What results from a comparison of different poems across his collections is a coherent understanding of the very myth of expression that is integral, as he suggests, to contemporary poetry and art, through the notion of ‘nature’ as a “complex symbol” (*F&F* 77), a “personality” that Mahon undertakes to imitate as his lyrical persona. What the study of ‘nature’ as a subject in poetry requires is an examination of trends across different artists where it is privileged as a mode of understanding the world. Yet, ‘nature’ is not explicitly recognised to be a mode of feeling in the modern lyric. Instead, contemporary poetry shows the freedom from any subject, particularly so in Mahon’s work. Nonetheless, this chapter argues that ‘nature’ forms an important connection for us to a sense of identification with the medium. It is an indication of the unity of purpose belonging to
Mahon’s original work that is most recently gathered up into his *New Collected Poems* (2011).

However, as Chapter Three argues, the use of mythology may be exposed as a ‘mere’ vehicle in Mahon’s work. The poet is aware of a dilemma between the past and present; he does not appear to finally share an important distinction between the uses, on the one hand, and language, on the other hand, of mythology belonging to Yeats’s terminology of a mask. In other words, Mahon does not share the distinction that Yeats makes between metaphors and symbols. Therefore, it could be argued that the symbolism of the past for Mahon only works as an inversion of an act of belief, which we discover in his application of Yeats’s ‘a written speech’ in his poetry. In the way that the demise of the Romantic image was responsible for the emergence of the pastoral tradition, Mahon suggests that a system of mystical or magical thought is only possible by undermining its tradition.

In Chapter Four, the desire for mythology for the making of art will be further explored. It was the very fact of “personality” in the nineteenth century that made it dangerous, not so much for the individual who finds its image, but rather, in the notion that it could be created at will. The danger for art, as Yeats shows us, lies in the image rather than in the mask; that is, in a “personality” that impacts the individual artist, rather than those he might in turn influence. Yeats’s Celtic or Irish mysticism was predominantly harmless, and yet, this is precisely the effectiveness of the occultic vision of his “Great Wheel,” which may be said to be the true measure of the ‘Irish lyric,’ as I have called it in this dissertation. I will consider that the priority of style over eloquence in Mahon’s work makes it distinctive, but also less illuminating of a truly created medium than Yeats’s ‘musical’ eloquence.
Finally, in the conclusion, I summarise the respective approaches in the work of Yeats and Mahon, in relation to the form and substance of the modern lyric. Beginning with the nineteenth century, but particularly in the twentieth century, the Irish lyric is a mode of the imaginative ‘life’ that distances the aesthetic from the political in poetry. The later Yeats proves how poetry may become a medium that represents the burden of a different kind of ‘speech’ altogether for written art. At the same time, the problem of poetic expression which also imbues Mahon’s work is not simply resolved by the existence of a body of work that Northern Irish poetry may stand for – for critics especially. Therefore, the focus of Mahon’s recent work finds that it is the manifestation of myth that stands between the poet and the achievement of poetic art. While the use of myth informs the ‘Yeats,’ of both the early and later work, it is also an acknowledgement of the long shadow he casts through a form of poetic memory that this thesis argues to be essential to the posterity of the Irish canon.
Critical Approach and Review of Major Secondary Sources

The respective art of Yeats and Mahon may be analysed more closely, as attempts to fulfill the role of the symbolic ‘will’ of an artist, which Yeats’s “Great Wheel” in *A Vision* demonstrates. The antitheticality of ‘form’ in the first place involves, for Yeats, an understanding of its origins in the creative ‘will’ of an individual artist. If the lyric was “nothing more than a means,” as Blake had seen it, it was because it provided a clue to the symbolism of ‘form’ in the only way it could still be meaningful to a post-romantic poet. However, precisely in this way, the elevation of poetic craft to the level of the sublime in Mahon’s *Harbour Lights* in particular emphasises a dissatisfaction with the achievement of the representation of art as a form of beauty.

Beauty, in fact, owes its notoriety to what the ‘sublime’ work of art precisely could not represent in relation to a more ideal medium that Edmund Burke was describing in his prose: “Works of art are the proper sphere of their power; and here it is that they [proportion and fitness] have their full effect” (97). In this way, lyric form belongs to a system of interpretation upon which the notion of modernism as a literary art form depends. To put it in a slightly different context, beauty is an ideal democratic pledge belonging to an invisible republic – as Burke seems to have recognised in his other writings.

Both Yeats and Mahon engage with beauty not just as a theory of feeling but also through its inherent meaning, something that requires less a definition than a determination to avoid rhetorical reality in art. In “There is No Natural Religion,” Blake claims that: “Man’s desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceiv’d” (2.5). In Section 8 of Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry*, having meticulously examined all the characteristics of beauty that are held, that “consist in
proportion or utility,” Burke adds an additional slant to his subject as an attempt to reconcile objectivity and desire: “But since, in all respects, the case is quite otherwise; we may be satisfied, that beauty does not depend on these, let it owe its origin to what else it will” (99). In this way, beauty represented Burke’s own preoccupation with an artistic personality that he could only ever aspire to.

The illusion of such a personality is important in both Yeats and Mahon, but it is in Yeats that it is also a void that beauty fills in ‘modern verse.’ As Gadamer says in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*:

In its irreplaceability, the work of art is no mere bearer of meaning – as if the meaning could be transferred to another bearer. Rather the meaning of the work of art lies in the fact that it is there. In order therefore to avoid all false connotations, we should replace the word ‘work’ by the word ‘creation.’ (33)

Therefore, the ‘work of art’ does not reflect the personality of just any artist, but rather, an artist for whom beauty becomes the only object, as well as meditation, of his work. As seen by poets who are intensely aware of rather than dismissive in relation to the canonical tradition in poetic history, the lyric implies an understanding that necessitates, as Geoffrey Hartman puts it, the discovery of “an unselfconscious medium” belonging to “myth-making [. . . ] a central concern of the Romantic poets” (*Beyond Formalism* 302). For Yeats, such a ‘medium’ was the key feature of what he called “symbolical writing” (*E&I* 156). The lyric, as symbolised in Yeats’s and Mahon’s respective work that will be studied, is a measured response to poetry – and whose only criticism might be that it indulges in the absence of a conventional subject.

In a different vein from Yeats, however, Mahon writes in *An Autumn Wind* that: ‘If “waste is the new raw material” as they say / our resources are infinite’ (‘The
Great Wave” 17-18). Nietzsche had declared in *The Birth of Tragedy* that: “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art.” Yet, Yeats could not reject that essential “primordial unity” (18) belonging to art. However, for the same reason, he rejected Blake’s term “Selfhood” for his system in *Vision*. In a note dated September 1925, in the year the first version of *Vision* was published, Yeats wrote that: “I have changed . . . “Ego” into Will for “Ego” suggests the total man who is all *Four Faculties*. Will or self-will was the only word I could find not for man but Man’s root. If Blake had not given ‘selfhood’ a special meaning it might have served my turn” (*CV* 14). Nonetheless, Yeats had found a similar source of aesthetic motivation as his predecessor – and which is found in the artistic ego. In a letter to John Quinn dated 20 March 1903 written from Coole Park, Yeats admitted that: “Nietzsche remains to me as stirring as ever, though I do not go all the journey with him” (*CL* 335). Nietzsche was an inspiration, but the revolt against Romanticism for Yeats was foundational and not just spurious. The difference was that it also promoted his personality – “the personality as a whole” (*E&I* 272).

In different ways, then, the respective work of Yeats and Mahon interrogates yet profoundly engages with the principle of an ideal or more dramatic lyric as embodying a form of beauty and the symbolism of a ‘living’ tradition. However, the “mystical dialectic” of history and myth is an important aesthetic that is more evidently part of Yeats’s aesthetic. Making an exceptional case out of post-romantic art, Murray Krieger argues that “organicism” is a concept worth keeping, on the principle that it is able to “explode” the very “unity” that is suggested in its very definition: “As I am describing it, built into the mystical dialectic of organicism, with its magical imposition of unity, is a negative thrust that would explode it” (qtd. in Fairer 25). In other words, Krieger declared in *A Reopening of Closure: Organicism*
against Itself a post-romantic ‘realism’ that a poet could then reinterpret as a system that accommodates a more ideal art. I argue that, in both Yeats’s and Mahon’s poetry, the signification of these forms of art is as important as the nature of the symbolic memory. Mahon’s spinning centre’ (“A Building Site” 41) addresses myth through drama which he avoids speaking of in relation to being a genre, though its ideal unity, of words and subject matter, is everywhere in his work.

In this way, the notion of an organic unity or ‘whole,’ which may be traced to Coleridge’s ‘Primary Imagination,’ is more than a device of romantic “wish-fulfillment” (Bush 528). For instance, Patricia Waugh highlights “how postmodern textualism expresses a late form of Romantic Irony where, if the metaphysical framework of Idealist thought has collapsed, what is still with us is the sense of art as both ontologically distinct from the world but also a fundamental aspect of existence in it.” By suggesting that “that world is only one of many possibilities” (11), Waugh manages to locate Romantic thought in the context of works of art, rather than in terms of an epistemology. This appears to be the challenge found in contemporary poetry, where the poststructuralist writer retains an image of a ‘written’ tradition over against its rejection, in accordance with Romantic history.

That image is associated, like Yeats’s ‘great memory,’ with the very heart of Romantic thought. In his essays, he rescues it through a ‘musical’ analogy that allows words to be brought into new relations: as he puts it, “that their emotion might live in other minds” (E&I 157). The symbol is, as Yeats puts it, “the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame” (116). In its essential importance, the symbol of art may be treated as an entirely different personality that is in conflict with the Romantic self. The difference is that Yeats had
also derived from his chosen medium of drama “a means of expression, not a special subject-matter” (284).

The essential conflict brought on by the poet as dramatist is in the discovery of eloquence or an ideal form of expression that an artist pursues. Denis Donoghue’s publications, particularly *On Eloquence* and *Speaking of Beauty*, show us the importance as well as the complexity of a subject that addresses the problems of Formalism in relation to the symbolism of feeling, albeit by arguing for its continuing necessity in the face of logical-positivistic forces of theory (*SOB* 121-23). Donoghue demonstrates that the more intuitive qualities of the artistic medium are derived out of an understanding of beauty that enriches the experience of literature in a world defined by commentary. His contributions to the field of aesthetics also include his other works like *Words Alone, The Pure Good of Theory, Connoisseurs of Chaos* and *Ferocious Alphabets* – which all demonstrate how the study of beauty allows literature to take centre stage, through a mode of criticism that echo the importance of art over the politics of theory.

Donoghue is especially astute where he suggests that assumptions to do with reading and interpretation may especially apply to works that are chaotic in their structure. As Donoghue makes the point in *On Eloquence*, a critic is more easily tempted to be the source of meaning where the perspective of an artist is sought as the subject rather than the object of the work. In the book that follows *Speaking of Beauty*, through the example of R.P. Blackmur, Donoghue highlights the problem of a critic’s treatment, and subsequent prejudice of, the essential value of a work of art. Thus, the function of beauty is found in the way that it frames the discussion on the lyric, as shown in the chapters that follow.
To concretise a more objective framework for literary criticism, Donoghue suggests that it is not in the presence of the critic but in the experience of particular texts, that beauty or the source of aesthetic comprehension may be discovered. Noting in *The Practice of Reading* that Stanley Fish’s “interpretative community” is really a creation of an ideal community, rather than an ideal community of readers, he says that: “We are impelled to conclude that no reading of a text is universally accepted unless a particular critic happens to speak of it—as T.S. Eliot did for many years—with special authority” (84). The intrinsic value of a work of art lies in its ability to bind its significance to its particular context, although not without the help of an external source. That source, found literally in ‘ mediums’ or ‘instructors,’ was an integral part of the ‘automatic writing’ of Yeats’s *Vision*. Without the help of a convenient analogy for the poetic process, however, Mahon discovers a medium, one that a translator may access, which offers the real reason or motivation for artistic creation: the search for the truth of a ‘poem’ as a work of art.

In other words, the work of art separates the ‘poem’ from ‘poetry.’ Offering a similar perspective as Donoghue, Jonathan Culler’s essay on Stanley Fish in *The Pursuit of Signs* suggests that, in being unable to signify the involvement of a process of ‘symbolisation,’ Fish’s reader response theory fails to be successful, despite his ‘method’ being amply exemplified by the critic himself. By pointing to the necessity of such a community, Fish’s theory highlights the use of generalisations like that of ‘the reader.’ Therefore, such a theory fails from the start because it conceals its assumptions about the sublime. As Culler intimates, if Fish had agreed on the subjectivity of signs, and therefore the untenability of his own theory, he would not have to appear to be unable to defend his position in relation to his implied readership (145).
Art is a discipline that is tricky to argue for in contemporary theory, and which may be explained through the notion of a ‘sign’ that continues to be provocative in relation to the significance of a poem. This is the problem that the lyric poses to an artist like Mahon: the promise of an absolute ‘form.’ Susanne Langer shows us that it is crucial for artists to understand the source of a writer’s articulated meaning – which, in Feeling and Form, is likened to a two-dimensional space belonging to “the most permanent anchors of vision.” Moreover, the presence of symbols “such as a fixed line or a delimited space” (F&F 55) intimates a more specific function of art other than its discursiveness. As Langer argues, “it is not the act of conception, but what is conceived, that enters into the meaning-pattern. [. . .] signification does not figure in symbolisation at all” (PNK 64f). Unlike a word, a symbol does not, firstly, denote another object, but rather, its function as the representation of art is all along present. Nonetheless, this is true for Yeats and Mahon in different ways.

The medium of an ideal lyric belonged to an object that Yeats implicitly describes in “The Symbolism of Poetry” as the “wish to gaze upon some reality, some beauty” (E&I 163). Although this may sound at first rather undiscriminating for an artistic objective, it is only because the emotion evoked is more precise than the expression allowed to him in an essay. However, as a quote, it does identify a true artistic sensibility or feeling: the logical construction of “an articulate form,” or “the form which the symbol ‘expresses’” (PNK 31), which Yeats and Mahon identify in different ways in their work. In this way, the ‘Nature’ of Yeats’s essays was more than an allusion to the Romantic sublime but its very evidence, as Chapter One discusses. In Vision, Yeats cites Giovanni Gentile’s interpretation of Kantian time and space; and as he notes in his footnote, “my symbols imply [Kant’s] description of time as a spatialising act” (AV 122f; emphasis added). Such an action made the
modern lyric possible, as a new source of feeling, something which will be examined in further detail in Chapter Four. This image of “time” became the underlying theme of Mahon’s recent work. The potential he saw in lyrical art was in how it allowed him to impose his own theme. For Yeats, its ‘medium’ would be implicit rather than explicit as the object of all aesthetic reflection.

Richard J. Finneran’s study, William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems, which highlights and reinforces the relationship between nature and art in Yeats’s poems, suggests that any interest in his craft necessarily leads one to an interpretation of the poems as an important part of the development of his prose style. It is precisely this style that lends itself to a subject, but more than that, its subject matter. An important goal of the lyric form, then, is found in the manner in which a system of symbols may be suggested. Intuitively, Hazard Adams’s The Book of Yeats’s Vision foregrounds the source of Yeats’s poetic imagination, in the form of a familiar trope: “When I refer to the book of Yeats’s poems or the book of Yeats’s vision, I am referring to the shapes I think Yeats wanted or allowed his books to have—the order of the words, poems, and whatever else he included.” Adams is content to leave that “book” as a “shape” or concept presumed upon, rather than acknowledging its obvious sources. Like a work of art that abandons its origins, it cannot refer to “[Yeats’s] meaning or even any meaning I tentatively constitute for them” (9-10).

The sources of such ‘meanings’ are essential to reading both Yeats and Mahon, and I suggest how they inevitably involve a distinctly ‘Irish’ context. Nonetheless, this is achieved in such a complex manner so that their respective work also evades its obvious connection for an Irish writer. The tradition of Irish poetry is characterised by the study of its form. Edna Longley has suggested that it is “Northern Irish poetry [that] dramatises the protean nature of form as it remakes tradition.”
According to her, such an understanding of ‘form’ is exclusive to a region that, thus, appears to fulfill the conditions, as well as demand, for a “modern canon” for artists (“‘Altering the Past’ ”16-17). Longley argues that Northern poetry presents an ultimate solution to the discipline of ‘form.’ What she claims in relation to a “middle of the road” diplomacy it offers, however, only makes the distinctions between life and art disappear. By making the “canon” rather than ‘form’ the centre of critical enquiry, the question of “the protean nature of form” has been left undetermined. Mahon’s critics like Elmer Kennedy-Andrews naturally study him in the context of other Northern Irish poets. However, in my comparison of the poets, the belief in the significance of a peculiarly Irish context is, firstly, a belief in artistic resonances that are particularly present through the influence of a bardic tradition, which is the central interest of Ronald Schuchard’s The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts, C.K. Stead’s The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot, Declan Kiberd’s essay on Yeats and Synge in The Irish Writer, as well as his chapter on the end of the “aura” of bardic art in Irish Classics, to name a few.

Instead of an institution, the tradition of poetry is, rather, present through the mythology of a collective voice – for both Yeats and Mahon. Studies like Oona Frawley’s Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature and Andrew Carpenter’s Place, Personality and the Irish Writer prove that ideas like nature are central to the style of an Irish writer. In this way, ‘nature’ continues to suggest the importance of analysing the mythology that informs the literature, but also the necessity of a purely aesthetic context for reading Irish poetry. Thus, in the following chapters, I will argue, in relation to Yeats and Mahon, how the very study of ‘form’ is characterised by its inability to anticipate the extreme course that the discourse of poetry must take in relation to the representation of art and beauty.
CHAPTER I: THE SYMBOL OF ‘THE WINDING STAIR’ AND W.B. YEATS’S MASKS OF NATURE

Introduction

Instead of its fulfillment, the absence of a Romantic vision of art shaped the work of artists in Yeats’s ‘Tragic Generation.’ At the same time, Yeats saw the need to re-examine this ‘history’ offered to post-romantic artists like himself. I argue that he secures the future of Irish art, despite and even because of the projections of the past, including its oral tradition. This was Yeats’s response to the crisis of bardic history, one that is ‘[b]red to a harder thing / Than Triumph’ (9-10), as described in “To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing.” In this way, for the later Yeats, post-romantic history became the myth of a tradition that offered a way of discovering an ‘absent centre’ in his vision of an Anglo-Irish art. The ‘foul rag and bone shop of the heart’ (“The Circus Animals’ Desertion” 40) showed a poet who stood for a myth of Irish literary history: ‘he seeks in book or manuscript / What he shall never find’ (“The Phases of the Moon” 19-20). Romantic history had allowed him to capture the spirit of Irish art that had become essential to the comprehension of the aesthetic aims of his later work. In short, Yeats transforms the poetic medium into an ‘ideal subject’ for the discourse of modern art, something that will be discussed throughout the course of the following chapters.

The memory of the bardic tradition was represented by the end of an era of Romantic inspiration. Likewise, what his early poetry could not do for Yeats was to allow him to be his own audience. However, his more dramatic art was also the beginning of a new personality, which he demonstrated in his collection, The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933). It was as a mature prose artist that Yeats discovered, quite literally, through the ‘automatic writing’ of A Vision, the source of the images
that informed his work. In this way, his ‘poetic’ image encompassed more than ‘poetry.’ In 1898, Yeats declared that: “with Goethe, Wordsworth, and Browning, [. . .] poetry gave up the right to consider all things in the world as a dictionary of types and symbols and began to call itself a critic of life and interpreter of things as they are” (E&I 192). This chapter argues for Yeats to be read as a truly modern artist, through the presence of a historical consciousness in his work that rewrites the narrative and myth of Romantic art. In talking about his generation in his Introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936), Yeats says that:

> Change has come suddenly, the despair of my friends in the ’nineties part of its preparation. Nature, steel-bound or stone-built in the nineteenth century, became a flux where man drowned or swam; the moment had come for some poet to cry ’the flux is in my own mind.’ (CW5 195)

The changing of guard from traditional poetry to modern verse was an immediate context that Yeats had employed but the continuing presence of Romantic discourse is implicit in his anecdotal demonstration of modern thought. What Yeats seemed to reflect was not just the changes to the subject matter of the poetry, nor the changes felt in a post-industrial society but rather an understanding of where the modern poet stood in relation to its vast new order. This called upon a tradition of realism in Yeats’s later work whose source in relation to his theory of “Nature” or the “great memory” (E&I 28) will be studied in this chapter. In the following chapters, this subject will be analysed in greater depth in its significance in relation to the creation of an imaginary canon in Yeats and Mahon.

The “flux” which Yeats describes above should not be confused with the “influx” of modernity, which he implies, in a diary written in 1930, is without “form” (Vision and Selected Writings 310). In an anthology of war poems, what Yeats aimed to prove to readers was that the events of modern life were insufficiently sui generis – though they also shape a new role for the poet, who now stood for an entire medium
of thought. The key to Yeats’s mature work suggests that the revival of beauty reflects an art of discourse that is undiminished despite the passing of time.

The aesthetics of his mask was essentially a theory of expression, and in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), involved a symbolic context which he called: ‘[t]he Book of the People’ in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (44) in the collection. It highlights Yeats’s later interest in occultic symbolism that gave *A Vision* (1925) its primary theme. As Yeats wrote in his “Letter to Ezra Pound”: “I send you the introduction of a book which will, when finished, proclaim a new divinity” (*AV* 27).

Through the symbol of ‘the winding stair,’ Yeats appeared to have been drawn to the possibility of a fully functional symbolism in his mature work:

> You think it horrible that lust and rage  
> Should dance attendance upon my old age;  
> They were not such a plague when I was young;  
> What else have I to spur me into song? (“The Spur” 1-4)

As what this poem from *New Poems* (1938) suggests, Yeats had found an alternative to the deconstruction of the image. The beauty of his mature work lies in its ability to register a bias for truth that suggests that he created his poetic mask from what was already integral to his critical *oeuvre*. Yeats no longer lacked a muse, a sign of artistic maturity, an understanding of beauty that emerges for his readers from a ‘harder’ source of lyrical inspiration:

> I’d stand and mutter there until he caught  
> ‘Hunchback and Saint and Fool,’ and that they came  
> Under the three last crescents of the moon,  
> And then I’d stagger out. He’d crack his wits  
> Day after day, yet never find the meaning. (“The Phases of the Moon” 131-135)

The poem included its own postscript. Appended to the main body of the poem, it suggests to us an additional layer of meaning instructive of an ironic, as well as
iconic, style: “I begin to study the only self that I can know, myself, and to wind the thread upon the perne again” (CW5 31).

What one discovers is a vision of a trope, an image that is the message of “The Phases of the Moon,” appropriated as a form of anticipation that carries the reader to its conclusion: ‘And the light proves that he is reading still. / He has found, after the manner of his kind, / Mere images; chosen this place to live in’ (11-13). In this way, Yeats created a basis for a heightened form of symbolism that was suggestive of the occultic language that his essay “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” shared with Vision. These images, as opposed to a ‘book’ found, describe a key to the mask of the later Yeats. He had not just dispensed with mimesis as a system of representation, as the term “romantic modernism” (Book of Yeats’s Vision 166) suggests, and which Hazard Adams’s book employed in order to argue for the continuing importance of the romantic image in Yeats’s Vision-phase.

In short, Yeats’s Vision mask is the promise of an ‘Image’ and structure whose lyrical and interpretative context is evident in his statement in the introduction to Vision that: “I put The Tower and The Winding Stair into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power” (8). The presence of ‘Nature’ in “Coole and Ballylee” (12), therefore, highlights to the reader the personal history that Yeats’s later artistic thought and work represented for his readers. In this way, the writer of Vision was his ideal creator, and where the nature of its “power” was concerned, his daimon or poetic self. Just like the fiction he wrote as the background to Vision, his ‘Image’ was a defense of his metaphysical system of images. His ‘mask’ was not simply derived as a convention of the lyrical mode but rather a rendering of the very medium of thought that shaped the work of art for Yeats.
‘Romantic’ Yeats

As an image that provoked a dialectical engagement with Romantic history, ‘the winding stair’ encapsulates the vision that Yeats had seen for post-romantic art which signalled a change in the way he foresaw a new phase for his lyrical art. It was a declaration of an apparent departure from the Romantic symbolism of Yeats’s early work: ‘Because I seek an image, not a book’ (“Ego Dominus Tuus” 67). Reflecting a particular change in his emotional landscape, I suggest that ‘the winding stair’ stands for all the possibilities belonging to a more dramatic understanding of the poet’s medium. What mattered was not an external landscape but a form of experience that could be read into it, something which is signified in “The Phases of the Moon” as ‘what form cook Nature fancies’ (116). In the poem, ‘Nature’ stood for a change or transformation of the image or ‘mask’ of the poet into something also mystical and not just rational: ‘They change their bodies at a word’ (113). As an indication of the dramatic potential of a single ‘word,’ ‘Nature’ in this poem shows that is is in opposition to its general use for nature poets. Like the image of ‘the winding stair,’ it allowed the poet to reject the role of a Romantic sage in favour of a heroic image for the present age.

In “Ireland and the Arts,” Yeats quotes American poet Walt Whitman as an example of a heroic self:

“The oration is to the orator, the acting is to the actor and actress not to the audience:
And no man understands any greatness or goodness but his own or the indication of his own.”

He must make his work a part of his own journey towards beauty and truth. He must picture saint or hero, or hill-side, as he sees them, not as he is expected to see them, and he must comfort himself, when others cry out against what he has seen, by remembering that no two men are alike, and that there is no “excellent beauty without strangeness.” In this matter he must be without humility. (E&I 206-7)
In the above extract, Yeats could be talking about a Romantic ‘beauty and truth.’ He was, but only to suggest a completely other representational plane for its qualities: “there is no ‘excellent beauty without strangeness.’” Originally from Keats, the subject now suggests “strangeness,” a feeling uncommon enough for us to suggest that its source lies in ‘[a]n image of mysterious wisdom won by toil’ (“The Phases of the Moon” 18). Likewise, Yeats’s ‘[t]he Book of the People’ in “Coole and Ballylee” may not simply be treated as the evidence of a company of ‘people.’ He meant the phrase to serve a specific understanding of the personality as a whole, which he had written about in “Swift’s Epitaph,” in relation to a man with whom everything was done in the service of art: ‘World-besotted traveller; he / served human liberty’ (5-6).

The discovery of the connection of personality to the thought and feeling of the later Yeats illustrated what was central to his art: ‘Such thought, that in it bound / I need no other thing, / Wound in mind’s wandering / As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound’ (“All Soul’s Night” 97-100). Yeats had come to a stage in his career where the power of a single image, the search for an appropriate lyrical address, became a search for ‘truth.’ His ‘mummy truths’ (86) declare that he had found a form or shape for his beauty, which, like the wandering that prompted Whitman’s ‘but,’ is a process that both conveys the artist and his medium. What occurs, as a result, is the realisation and recognition of the absolute connection between truth and beauty: “I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand” (E&I 271). Intended to be read in context, “that I myself was the fleeting thing” or “the god it calls among us” (E&I 157) are statements of an obvious fact, but for this reason elusive to the artist.
Yeats was driving home the importance of an image or mask where ‘thought’ could find a referent, as ‘Such thought’ implies. “Beauty and truth” may be the central subject for the Romantic artist – but they also became integral to Yeats’s prosaic style. Although Yeats remained committed to lyrical feeling, he also clarified the responsibility of the artist that is quite distinct from a picturesque nature:

to be happy one must delight like Nature in mere profusion, in mere abundance, in making and doing things, and if one sets an image of the perfect before one it must be the image that draws her perpetually, the image of a perfect fullness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise. (E&I 54)

The point of such an image is all important for us because it shows him attempting to reconcile an essential aspect of his artistic thought, showing us that the definition of an individual artist or genius was no longer impossible: “we should ascend out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole” (E&I 271-72). If the modernist’s muse is history, it still begs the question: where is this personality that can keep it all in perspective? The source of Yeats’s delight is not “Nature” but rather a kind of memory that fills in for the artistic will. Its likeness or similarity to “an Earthly Paradise” is all that is necessary here for the poet.

The historical disappearance of ‘nature’ as a genuine mode of feeling was a foregone conclusion for Romantic poets. However, it was not simply that the Romantic tradition had been abandoned; rather, it now took a different form, largely due to Yeats’s influence and his part in creating an Irish literary history. What Yeats describes as “some little song about a rose” (AV 24) was already achieved in his early work. Yet, ‘nature’ also became material for poetic invention, something against which to re-evaluate its symbolism. From the point of view of his later work, where the lyric once dominated as a separate artistic vision, its ‘faculty’ was now integral to
the poet’s entire *oeuvre*, as ‘The lovely, satisfied, indirect eyes’ of his later symbolism (‘The Phases of the Moon’ 83) – and therefore coinciding with the subject matter of *Vision*. From any point in Yeats’s poetic history, it was impossible to abandon his invisible but ideal audience. Richard Ellmann notes that:

> As a poet [Yeats] largely accepted his father’s position that the poet must be free of dogma and formula. But he feared that the real reason for his reluctance to use the *Vision* in verse might be his timidity, and therefore wrote a few poems explicitly didactic, based on the system, to salve his conscience. (*Identity of Yeats* 233)

What this “conscience” consists of is an acknowledgement that *Vision* was, at least in intention, written as a theory of *poesis*. “The Phases of the Moon” is an important poem for this reason. Its depiction of beauty goes beyond the nihilistic art of Nietzsche’s to a confirmation of a symbolism peculiar to Yeats: “Everything that wills can be desired, resisted or accepted, every creative act can be seen as fact, every *Faculty* is alternately shield and sword” (*AV* 124). As such, having “one gyre within the other always” was the ideal metaphysical situation where, in Heraclitus’s words, “Dying each other’s life, living each other’s death” (*AV* 68) became a formula for reality, if there ever was one.

While Symons sought to unite the world of Symbolism in *The Symbolic Movement in Literature*, Yeats’s passionate quest for art and beauty continued to need a more complex symbol than the ultimate goals of art and religion; more absolute than that offered by a poet’s previous experiences with form and beauty. As if in response to the failure of an Anglo-Irish renaissance in terms of a purely symbolic genius, Yeats writes in Book 1 of *Vision* that: “but even the sphere formed by Concord is not the changeless eternity, for Concord or Love but offers us the image of that which is changeless” (67-68). Yeats needed what his symbol offered, which was something other than “Concord” – something more than a response to a prevailing image that
simply holds the antithetical action together. Such an image was a supreme symbol, “winding” back on its “perne” (CW5 31), bringing a Romantic past into present literary history. It is in the context of the post-Romantic tradition that “the image of that which is changeless” actually reflects the prescience that Yeats employs through his creation of an antithetical tradition. His ‘Irish’ context is firstly a theory of the poet’s relationship with his chosen medium that is akin to meeting his opposite personality – the “nothing” towards which a Nietzschean “Discord” tends. As such, Yeats finds in “Concord” an image that is already present from the poet’s personal history. Rather than the essence of the ‘thing,’ ‘Nature’ becomes the object of thought in his mature work where the role of dramatic speech marked a new phase in his poetic mythology.

We have moved from ‘Nature’ as being part of the poet’s history or inheritance – to its very likeness, where post-Romantic history now plays its dramatic role. Referring to Yeats’s poems written after “Sailing to Byzantium,” Arra Garab says that they “reveal a counterbalancing tendency, a vital compulsion to present and preserve what previously he had ignored or denounced.” As Garab argues, when read together, the “Concord” belonging to his “body of poems” is more than a reaction to reality: “What is most significant about them, and why they bring his life’s work to ‘wholeness,’ i.e., integrity, is that their otherness is complementary—‘serving to fill out or complete.’” The condition in which “Wholeness . . . finally wrought both [Yeats’s] life and work and their intriguing tangle” has less to do with “the formal and ideational tensions implicit in the poems themselves” (100), than with an awareness of a personality that the reader grows increasingly aware of, as a new deliberate initiative, now part of a stylistic experiment.
What his work forces us to concede is that there is no greater antithesis than
what his later lyrics brought: ‘Because the spring-time has not come – / Nor know
what disturbs our blood / Is but its longing for the tomb’ (“The Wheel” 6-8). Richard
Ellmann has observed that:

... to read the literature on Yeats is to come to feel that the search for his
sources and analogues has become disproportioned, and that a tendency is
growing to turn all that marvelously innovative poetry into a resume of what
other people have written. An inspired resumé, of course, but still a resumé.
Sometimes the resumé includes what other people have painted or carved, too.
(“Yeats Without Analogue” 31)

In describing the effect of the Image, which Frank Kermode argues is key to Yeats’s
art, Kermode uses the present tense, and says that “In Yeats’s work, the notion of
human sacrifice as the price of the symbolic dance is deeply and curiously embedded”
(89). The complexity and ambiguity of such a “power” demonstrates the doubleness
of Yeats’s vision – that is, a vision of his “dancer-image,” the term Frank Kermode
uses in relation to the key in Yeats’s art (Romantic Image 89) which I will explore, in
relation to what Yeats calls ‘the image of such politics’ (6), as he calls it in the
opening poem of The Winding Stair and Other Poems, “In Memory of Eva Gore-
Booth and Con Markievicz.”

The poem, which M. L. Rosenthal calls “one of Yeats’s most telling elegiac
poems” (299), marks a poetic history that now mattered, as created by one who also
stands outside it. Terry Eagleton, in relation to what is central to Yeatsian form, has
said that:

Because the Romantic heritage is still for historical reasons a powerful
resource for him, as it is not by and large in Britain, Yeats has a largely pre-
modernist sense of the particular, and of its relatively unproblematical
consorting with the general. (Crazy John and the Bishop 282)

Once the lyric could reiterate itself against the backdrop of the dramatic, the poet
could face his present situation with new forms of experience. The “particular” could
“consort with the general” once Yeats determined that there was no formal escape for the modern poet, apart from a unity implied in relation to a perspective gleaned from his emphasis on the dramatic, in his work as a whole.
‘Personal Utterance’

A bard is a poet whose reputation has been frequently associated with the end of an entire tradition. This chapter deals with an understanding of artistic creation that is accomplished, not as the decline of tradition but as its making. Yeats believed in a collective memory or imagination whose associations could attach themselves to “modern verse” in the public imagination. He managed this even without alluding to an overtly personal ambition. The image of ‘the winding stair’ was important because it was not a theme that he had discovered but the basis for a new structure of reading Yeats that could rival the “political vocabulary” that had been imposed in readings of his poetry. According to Donoghue, such vocabulary denied the poet his theme (Practice of Reading 243), and consequently, readers’s access to it. I argue that ‘the winding stair’ represents a medium that is, unlike all the other arts, not lacking in a signified. Seamus Heaney says that:

There is a relation between the process of composition and the feel of the completed poem all through Yeats’s work. From the beginning things had to be well made, the soul had to be compelled to study, the images had to be masterful. (Preoccupations 75)

These “images” meant the lyric had to be rescued from the “mimicry and naturalism” (E&I 229) which burdened art for Yeats, and which occurred, as it was for Eliot too, not just as an escape from personality.

Poetry is deprived of influence where it has lost its primary vehicle of the imagination found in its images. Nonetheless, as C.K. Stead shows us, it is precisely through a particular image from his “Unity of Being” that Yeats had reinterpreted the poet’s place in relation to the role of art in society:

Symbolist attitudes are central to Yeats’s work; but Yeats is more than the sum of his antecedents. His poetry enters the public world as the work of no other Symbolist poet does. The conquest is unobtrusive, but complete. By 1916 Yeats’s poetry had a hold on the public world which made his English contemporaries (Kipling, Austen, Watson, Newbolt, Noyes—poets who
There was a fundamental aesthetic or vision in Yeats’s work that appears to have allowed him to broaden the legacy of the Symbolist tradition, as it was described by his friend and fellow poet, Arthur Symons, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*.

Yeats had written, as a commentary on a sequence he wrote called *Meditations in Time of Civil War* (*CP* 200-206), that “the ‘I’ of the poem is less a person… than a poet with a clear function, the unambiguous witness of “life’s own self-delight”’ (qtd. in Devine 82). As I argue, more than a reflection of what he has always accomplished as a poet, such a “witness” offers an almost completely different slant to Yeats’s later work. Poetry has become the context of the poet’s created characters, turning the lyrical mode into an opportunity for the dramatic utterance: “Personal utterance which has almost ceased in English literature, could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself” (*Aut* 105). Rather than producing new lyrical content, this “personal utterance” involves a reinterpretation of his poetry in a style of prose that he introduces in his work.

Yeats discovered a heightened form of dramatic expression, or the ‘more substantial joy’ (“At Algeciras – a Meditation upon Death” 9) belonging to his later work. The substance of his personal “drama” is the basis of the subject matter implied in many of the poems I consider in this chapter. Poetic speech was a subject that had become more than simply a genre but rather an imaginative idiom for Yeats. Yeats had departed, as many critics have noted, from the mystical sources of his early work. However, the treatment of the subject became even more “direct” upon writing *Vision* (12). In his review of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, Yeats’s description of the “impassioned purpose, a propaganda, let us say” of speech belonged to “the experimentalist” as opposed to the “mystic” (*E&I* 422). In other words, it was the
presence of a structure of myth that allows itself to be adopted as a dimension of artistic beauty that could could resist imitation. There was a practical reason for this, and it involved the discovery of eloquence.

Yeats’s lyrics reflected the thoroughness with which he had undertaken to reproduce his poetic drama of words: the very medium of his poetic ideas. Regarding the availability of “Gaelic material” for such a quest, W.J. Mc Cormack says in his introduction to *From Burke to Beckett* that:

The drama offers particular advantages for this inquiry – the explicitly multivocal form of expression, the accessible fissures between set and dialogue, setting and allusion, etc. (11)

The lyric, for Yeats, was the reenactment of a symbolist drama, in relation to what he saw to be the setting for a subject that emphasised not just its genre but the very force of the lyric voice that permeates his art. Yeats had found a form of expression able to survive the forces of the material world of fact. Indeed, for Yeats, drama was inseparable from the lyric as a sign of poetic discourse.

In this way, the illusion created by the lyric was the presence of a subject, the very institution he hoped to put on display. Therefore, he says: ‘Bid imagination run / Much on the Great Questioner; / What He can question, what if questioned I / Can with a fitting confidence reply’ (“At Algeciras” 15-18). The consequences of the failure of the imagination had even greater consequences in relation to drama. As Yeats wrote, “neither I nor my generation could escape [Ibsen] because, though we and he had not the same friends, we had the same enemies” (*Aut* 279). They shared the “same enemies” found in political representations of subjects that only appealed to the popular opinion. Yet, there was a further reason for Yeats’s interest in drama, because it was firstly an experiment in the formal reality or eloquence of the lyric. In
this way, he did not have to be troubled by the realistic drama that Ibsen was bound to be judged by.

Drama was not as exclusive a medium in the way art was for Yeats; it was only that drama represented, as Yeats says in his Autobiographies: “that forgotten thing, the normal active man” (Aut 492). Yeats was attracted to a dramatic life that he hoped that Ibsen represented, but which he instead appears to have perfected through Vision, where he highlighted the “error” of mere “negation.” The word “negation” suggests that there is no difference that Yeats’s mature work offers, particularly in relation to an image of the antithetical self that suggested a different interpretation of style or eloquence which went further than the “logical refutations of the writer or movement that is going out of fashion” (AV 72f). After watching another Ibsen play, the first one in England, Yeats had said: “‘Art is art because it is not nature,’ I kept repeating to myself, but how could I take the same side with critic and washerwoman?” (Aut 279) The conjecture was that neither was capable of appraising a play beyond the obvious demands of public taste. At least, Yeats could not be accused of being neutral: “‘Contraries are positive,’ wrote Blake, ‘a negation is not a contrary’” (AV 72). In a nutshell, the structure of symbolic art was evident in what might be considered the presence of a ‘new’ or changed internal dynamic in his work.
Yeatsian ‘Phantasmagoria’

Describing himself as one of ‘the last romantics’ in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (41), Yeats’s objective was not to restore poetry to its former glory. He instead created an aesthetic that evaluated the subject of his early work. Emerson succinctly says in his essay “Self-reliance” that: “Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic. In history, our imagination makes fools of us, plays us false” (32). Oona Frawley has highlighted that Yeats’s later poetics was to become even more concerned with finding a place or a manner for speaking about nature:

Yeats’s profound difficulty with reconciling his need of the past – witnessed in his preoccupation with Irish mythology and literature, in his selective interest in certain moments in Irish history, and too in his faithfulness to the memories of his Irish childhood — with the impossibility of recovering that past ends in his creation of a place like Byzantium, out of time, out of nature, and yet somehow reliant on all of his previous experience. (76)

His past thus lent itself to a consciousness of the present. However, he was “selective,” as Frawley notes, of the material that could be used for the present.

Therefore, it is important to study the role of the poet in relation to an imagination where images, like Byzantium, have been granted in relation to their ability to transcend time as to move across it.

*The Winding Stair* was first presented in 1929, but without either *Words for Music Perhaps* or *A Woman Young and Old*, sequences that he included only later.

The second appearance of the collection in 1933 emphasises that the applicability of Yeats’s style was not just in relation to his poetry. His ‘Image,’ which is in capitals in *Vision*, was a substitutionary force for the language and discourse of *form*, in the way that eloquence points simply to the “flair of being alive” (*OE* 148), according to Donoghue in *On Eloquence*. The integrity of the medium of the ‘Image’ is what makes it useful to artists alike, and therefore became, for Yeats, an illustration of what was at stake in a symbol of feeling. As Emerson says in this regard: “Beautifully
shines a spirit through the bruteness and toughness of matter. Alone omnipotent, it converts all things to its own end” (8). Even if Yeats’s work did not agree completely with Emerson’s idea of a transcendental image of the beautiful, its feeling is nonetheless the driving force behind the discovery of symbols in so far as they are also, as I argue in this chapter, the very images in the collection that prove the existence of a single author.

As I will argue in this chapter, these ‘images’ appear to serve no more elevated purpose than the contexts within which Yeats’s critical understanding of poetry had evolved, a context that seemed to reach further into his personality than would otherwise had been possible. Richard Ellmann tells us that:

. . . Yeats’s frequent failures in arguments with his father had something to do with his cultivation of his image-making faculty. He soon found that a picture, unlike a logical proposition, cannot be refuted. Frank O’Connor has described how, in the midst of an argument with George Russell in later life, Yeats would suddenly pull an image from his private phantasmagoria such as, ‘But that was before the peacock screamed’, and puzzle and overbear his opponent. The method must have been even more necessary and effective when he was but an ill-read young man. (56)

Yeats achieved his ideal “image-making faculty” or a personality otherwise exclusive to a poet, on his own terms. The above account shows that “a picture” became a way of evaluating his growing conviction about the work of the image, which became increasingly idiosyncratic for his critics, reflecting a shift in the interpretative environment of his lyrics.

True poetry is not something we can be told to attend to; it has to happen as a result of its spontaneous representation. That “unified conception” we expect in what Cassirer calls “theoretical thinking,” as opposed to “mythical thinking” (Language and Myth 32), was what Yeats had worked hard to liberate his genius from. However, it was not just any audience who is capable of: “true Unity of Being, where all the nature murmurs in response if but a single note be touched, is found emotionally,
instinctively, by the rejection of all experience not of the right quality, and by the limitation of its quantity” (*Aut* 355). Such an image is a substitutionary force, replacing style, which Donoghue says is almost too easily accepted by the popular imagination (*OE* 40), with eloquence. This is what eloquence means, freeing us to the acknowledgement of such a genius, although not in any way achievable as an “end.”

The central proposition of Yeats’s “personal utterance” is that it needed to undergo a process of, as described above, “the rejection of . . . experience.” The consequence, at least in part, is that, like eloquence, it “does not serve a purpose or an end in action” (*OE* 148). This is what eloquence means, freeing us to the acknowledgement of genius, although not in any way achievable as an “end.” His later symbolism was well aware of the criticism that the poetic image attracted, but he also knew that a “quarrel with others” (*CW5* 8) could add nothing to its imaginative claims. Instead, the particular uses of Yeats’s images illustrate the more private, if we were to be generous, but if we were to be more honest, more undermining character of Yeats’s later symbolism.

History alone is not helpful in thinking about the primary governing power or influence as indicated by Yeats’s “personal utterance.” Likewise, Donoghue is conscious of the temptation to encompass eloquence by making it “ancillary to rhetoric, merely a means to another end” (*OE* 148). That divest edit of its power, and language of its ability to surprise our ordinary world. How do we explain the significance of the poet’s private encounters, yet not merely ‘Whatever their loose fantasy invent’ (“The Leaders of the Crowd” 4)? Yeats turns the mirror on a society where the image is formalised for the purposes of criticism or commentary; in the way Donoghue does when he argues that:

I don’t see any problem in acknowledging the priority of discourse as a social phenomenon. But there is no merit in giving the idea of society a sentimental
aura, as if a *sensus communis* happily and gratuitously followed from the fact that certain people share a country and speak more or less the same language. We are social animals, but in practice that doesn’t commit us to solidarity. *(Practice of Reading* 106)

Donoghue could be talking about the interpretation of art and not just the language of common discourse. What Yeats’s personality, as exposed through his arguments with his father, does not distinguish is a real and false argument. The suggestion in his 1933 collection is that there is little distance between the image and the mask. The immediate effect is to remove the privileged position of a reader, and not just for a writer or poet, in relation to speaking of beauty.

Lyric poetry “read out of a book,” as Yeats says in “The Tragic Theatre” had lost its “lyric feeling” (*E&I* 240), and had been replaced by “contemporary suggestion” (*E&I* 243) instead. Liz Greene, in her study of the psychological basis of symbols, says it this way: “One can never fully account for the manifold meanings that any given symbol has, nor is it possible to categorise them in intellectual terms because there is often an antithesis – an opposite – which the conscious mind is unable to grasp simultaneously” (qtd. in Liungman 10). According to Greene, what endangers the psychological potential of a symbol, or its “manifold meanings,” is a single source of meaning intimated by a “given symbol.” Yeats attempted to “simultaneously” suggest that his antithetical mask of nature reflects a symbol of “Unity of Being,” where the existence of an external structure imposes, but does not satisfy its underlying need for a mask of nature – as a language that may be appropriated by society at large.

At his most didactic, we find Yeats’s associative theory of the ‘great memory’ written about in his essay on “Magic” (*E&I* 50). What is clear from Yeats’s “Magic” is the importance of symbols to the imaginative life. They belong to a writer’s tools, but are also a source of creative tension. The essay appears to be an argument for a
form of discourse, which Yeats attempts in a very candid manner: “At first I tried to
distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols
and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little or nothing” (E&I
49).

Poetry, as the vehicle of communal living, is unable to gratify the need for a
theory of eloquence, but in this way, becomes a viable aesthetic belonging to the
medium Yeats was creating in “Among School Children”; a ‘nature’ that belonged to
something beyond the Platonic imagination (41). Paul de Man demonstrates from the
final line of the poem that this characteristic of Yeats’s medium was brought on by
the very structure of feeling that is found in the poem:

It is . . . possible . . . to read the last line literally rather than figuratively . . .
not that sign and referent are so exquisitely fitted to each other that all
difference between them is at times blotted out but, rather, since the two
essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined
in the imagined ‘presence’ that the poem addresses, how can we possibly
make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what
cannot be identified? (“The Rhetorical Question” 455)

He is suggesting that Yeats’s rhetorical question: ‘How can we know the dancer from
the dance?’ (64) eludes the grasp of the critic – and is, in fact, unable to be answered
in the ‘long school room’ (1). In other words, we may not extract from the poem its
muses – of nature, beauty and music – for ourselves, but for this reason we may
appreciate the tone that Yeats associates with their respective achievements: ‘they too
break hearts – O Presences / That passion, piety or affection knows, / And that all
heavenly glory symbolise – / O self-born mockers of man’s enterprise’ (53-56).

The symbolism that de Man identifies, then, creates in the reader an awareness
of the underlying message of Yeats’s images ‘of man’s enterprise,’ which could be
lost in the hands of a lesser artist. Yeats is demonstrating that there is only one way of
approaching the significance of these symbols; as things marking the distinction
between “naturalism” and the “naturalistic means” of the imagination (E&I 31),
which is the priority of the artistic medium. As Donoghue puts it: “Beauty, whether
we try to define it or not, should maintain its recalcitrance and go its own way” (SOB
11). It appears that de Man goes as far as to define beauty as an image that constrains
both the ‘dancer’ and the ‘dance,’ but without being able to illustrate their difference,
showing that the only image that ‘man’s enterprise’ may conceive is one that is freed
from the burden of an interpretative history. However, for Yeats, the use of images,
“whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by
their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist” (E&I 49), also points to a
means of expressing the “remak[ing] the world” (E&I 52), without which ‘true Unity
of Being,’ as Donoghue reflects as well, could have little import to an artist of beauty.
Ideas of the Beautiful

Yeats offers the following commentary as the opening to “A Tragic Theatre”:

“I did not find a word in the printed criticism of Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* about the qualities that made certain moments seem to me the noblest tragedy, and the play was judged by what seemed to me but wheel and pulleys necessary to the effect, but in themselves nothing” (*E&I* 381). His argument with it, as it were, was that the manner the play was judged could not give its readers an idea of what was needed for the construction of its tragic subject as opposed to a genre made for the sake of entertainment. Yeats understood the limitations of symbolism, or more precisely, to use Donoghue’s word, its “velleities” (*OE* 168). For Yeats, it meant that drama needed a proper audience, and which had been replaced by commentary, fuelling his skepticism about the medium and production of artistic thought in his day. Nonetheless, this offered him an opportunity to suggest the role of the aesthete in relation to reality.

In his prose, Yeats had sought distance from common opinion that overlooked a necessary feeling found in genuine art and literature. In his essay on Edmund Spenser, Yeats demonstrates to readers the literary function of prose, one that examined as well as extended the discourse of the beautiful. Yeats’s work preserves the dynamic potential of the image of the beautiful, through the careful application of the beautiful as an aesthetic value in a medium where the presence of a symbolic authority is naturally pervasive: “[Spenser] says in his *Hymne in Honour of Beautie* that a beautiful soul, unless for some stubbornness in the ground, makes for itself a beautiful body, and he even denies that beautiful persons ever lived who had not souls as beautiful” (*E&I* 366). The primary effect of the above passage does not appear to find fault with the determinism of the ‘beautiful,’ but rather, selects its effects as
gathered from Spenser’s hymn. Paraphrasing Spenser, Yeats makes the point that the ‘beautiful’ is a term that the poet consistently returns to throughout *Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, almost as if it were the stylistic characteristic of the entire piece. It is notable that the term is unable to be further simplified in his prose; it is untranslatable, and therefore assumes the state described of it.

As though discovering the romantic sublime, Yeats associates the beautiful with a source that was more transcendental than that seen in his poetry; as he says, ‘The innocent and the beautiful / Have no enemy but time’ (“In Memory of” 24-25).

What the artist is precisely concerned with are ideas of the beautiful. The manner in which they are discovered as forms of feeling in Yeats’s essay has the effect of transforming the very source of their art, no longer to be found in verse but in the artist’s prose. As the poet, Rilke, says:

> *Everything* is gestation and then birthing. To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one’s own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating. (24)

The eloquence on display belongs less to Spenser’s work than the subject that Yeats manages to transform into a pure expression, albeit where the source appears less than reliable. Indeed, what is “the unsayable, the unconscious” is the perfection of the intended subject of the essay, which simply gives the ‘beautiful’ a context. It is a word, then, that transforms the religious context Spenser was writing in.

The form in which the ‘beautiful’ occurs suggests a symbolic understanding of a body of work that, for Spenser at least, was a necessary ‘reality.’ However, in response to the opening lines of “The Choice,” ‘The intellect of man is forced to choose / perfection of the life, or of the work,’ Auden says:

> This is untrue; perfection is possible in neither. All one can say is that a writer
who, like all men, has his personal weaknesses and limitations, should be aware of them and try his best to keep them out of his work. For every writer, there are certain subjects which, because of defects in his character and his talent, he should never touch. (19)

What Auden had discovered was that Yeats’s ‘perfection of the life’ was really a guise to keep ‘the work’ from precisely such scrutiny. Therefore, if its image was of perfection, it was not the ‘perfection of the work.’ Auden says that, “there are certain subjects” that are detrimental to living the artistic life, acknowledging that he comprehends why Yeats needed to create the difficult knot that is the poem’s proposition of artistic perfection.

Instead of reinterpreting what that perfection is, just as Yeats refrains from identifying with a different form of the ‘beautiful’ in his essay on Spenser, what the poem forces readers to do is submit to its sentiment; “there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection” (E&I 207). The tautology of the printed word, as the form that the ‘beautiful’ takes on – a Romantic heritage that is charged with a symbolic structure by Yeats – is something to be utilised. However, true contemplation on the beautiful which, for Spenser, proves the state of blessedness, necessitates the suppression of beauty as a consciousness.

Thus, the beautiful becomes instead part of the speculative process that the reader undergoes as a result of the ‘perfection of the work.’ Where it remains an important part of the lyrical experience, beauty or the ‘perfection of the work,’ does not have an emotional origin apart from art; apart from the mere, to quote Rilke, “impression,” its “embryo of a feeling.” In place of Yeats’s own judgement on beauty, in “Mohini Chatterjee,” the Brahmin’s suggestion is to ‘Pray for nothing’ (3):

Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet. (‘Mohini Chatterjee’ 23-28)

Beauty has to be marked by the beautiful; that is, an aesthetic value which is self-consciously subjective, and therefore belonging to the place of discourse. As conceived by the artist as a naive response to art, beauty entails the juxtaposition of life and art; ‘[a] boy’s turbulent days,’ when words still meant the world to him.

In this way, Yeats’s poem, written ‘in commentary,’ is a critique of the discourse of the beautiful: those ‘Men [who] dance on deathless feet.’ At the same time, these men whose ‘Grave is heaped on grave’ (19) belong to the same intricate system of symbolism that Yeats uses to critique beauty: “[Spenser] began in English poetry, despite a temperament that delighted in sensuous beauty alone with perfect delight, that worship of Intellectual Beauty which Shelley carried to a greater subtlety and applied to the whole of life” (E&I 108). There was something that Spenser did not have; the vision of “the whole of life” – a vision of how his image of beauty might be read according to literary history, something that Shelley however prioritised:

It may be that his subconscious life seized upon some passing scene, and moulded it into an ancient symbol without help from anything but that great Memory; but so good a Platonist as Shelley could hardly have thought of any cave as a symbol, without thinking of Plato’s cave that was the world . . . . (E&I 81-82; emphasis added)

Shelley had looked for symbols beyond what was obvious, and therefore overlooked images that could have been effective as a symbolic vehicle. He had chosen his symbols from something more abstract than clearly of the emotional reach belonging to his work.

Shelley’s work was unable to sustain a meditative philosophy with which we might speak of beauty as an alternative ‘world.’ It was the route Yeats had travelled on as well, but only to show that it ends there: “When I remember that Shelley calls our minds ‘mirror of the fire for which all thirst,’ I cannot but ask the question all
have asked, ‘What or who has cracked the mirror?’ I begin to study the only self that I can know, myself, and to wind the thread upon the perne again” (CW5 31). Yeats had the advantage of not being Shelley, for, as the above quote from Per Amica Silentia Lunae suggests, Shelley was a key contributor to Yeats’s A Vision – or at least the reflection his ‘Intellectual Beauty’ imposed on Yeats. Shelley’s personality was not found in the equation, however: “It was years before I could rid myself of Shelley’s Italian light, but now I think my style is myself” (E&I 208).

Shelley’s philosophy became material for Yeats’s beauty, which in some ways, was an unimaginable progression for the Romantic poet himself. Jean Hall notes that: “[Shelley’s] trouble begins when in a dream, ‘He images to himself the Being whom he loves.’” For the poet, precisely because of the importance of his personality, it limited the application of his self-knowledge: beauty could not be “infinite and unmeasured” (Shelley ctd. in Hall 26). Shelley’s light did not work for him precisely because he was inhibited by the singular function of his image. Precisely because Shelley lived as the symbolic centre of his own work, “[t]he magnificence and beauty of the external world” (qtd. in 26) was lost to him.

According to Yeats, perhaps because he could make more use of Shelley for his argument on beauty, it was Shelley, rather than Spenser, who had sought the substance of the beautiful in his own lifetime. Rather than wait for the hour of it, in death, Yeats pursues it through an interrogation of his own image of himself, which admits continuous yearnings towards beauty as a system of nature. That the personality of beauty suffers through Spenser’s use of it in his writings had provoked Yeats’s use of the term; that is, the ‘beautiful’ as a source of prosodic transformation. Yeats’s interpretation of Shelley’s artistic medium suggests the importance of the “great Memory,” whose representation offers images belonging to the ‘body’ of
reality. What Yeats does is to apply himself to a word that did not just belong to the course of Romantic history because Spenser was denied any connection to his sources of the ‘beautiful,’ thus substituting the substance of beauty for his allegory of the ‘perfect’ man, whose image was even further from Yeats than Shelley’s metaphysical ‘light.’

Written as a rejection of allegory, the dynamic of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” demonstrates how Yeats’s understanding of the ‘perfection of the work’ takes place; and whose construction, moreover, admits an even more perfect fancy. The symbolic form of beautiful objects is not a meaning that we need, or acquire, as if from an external sense. Instead, eloquence is derivative of an inner sense in the word itself, an internal disposition towards the creation of a momentary feeling in an eternity of likenesses:

I am content to follow to its source  
Every event in action or in thought;  
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
When such as I cast out remorse  
So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest. (65-72)

Michael J. Sidnell says that: “From Responsibilities on, the idea of the artist as the creator of the beauty that never was, as opposed to the visionary who sees eternal beauty, is never absent from Yeats’s work” (Poetry and Poetics 56-7). Yet, ‘[e]verything we look upon is blest’ is an indication of a medium, a perspective from which to look upon such forms, without which the ‘actions’ or ‘thoughts’ of an artist may be found to be meaningless. The predominant verb is ‘follow,’ suggesting that Yeats had found a substitute for allegory, found in the image of eloquence: “[t]he beauty that never was.”
Indeed, the premise of a coherent personality points to how and why the lyric still had an allure for Yeats in his post-dramatic career – as an image of ‘[s]ome vague Utopia’ (“In Memory of” 11). Though Yeats’s image recognises its mask, what happens is that they have become inseparable in that ‘vague Utopia.’ It is a parody of his younger self, albeit in a collection where he appears to acknowledge Shelley’s ‘light’ or ‘[a]n image of such politics’ (“In Memory of” 13), a sensibility about his profession that echoes the main theme of the collection: ‘We the great gazebo built, / They convicted us of guilt; / Bid me strike a match and blow (30-32). An important conclusion that I come to from the foregoing discussion is that the consequence of all ‘actions’ and ‘thoughts’ to do with the beautiful have come down to a single inference. Rather than simply due to the lingering Romantic poet in Yeats, the ‘beautiful,’ and the ‘blest,’ need to be read as allusions to the ‘great memory.’

As an embodiment of that responsibility, the opening poem of the collection may be read as a particular manifestation of the ‘great memory,’ as well as Yeats’s admission of the ‘politics’ involved in the use of art as a vehicle of symbolic meaning. As we have seen in relation to both Shelley and Spenser, Yeats was desiring for the perfection of a purely literary construction: ‘the great gazebo.’ In “Mohini Chatterjee,” a poem important for the sudden commentary that intrudes in the middle of the stanza, Yeats confesses that: ‘upon my breast / A myriad heads have lain” (10-11). In the absence of a ‘real’ ‘utopia,’ perhaps only to be found through the antithesis of beauty, his lines continue to be important to the perfection of beauty in both his lyrics and his prose, and in this way, as we shall see, returning to the poet’s own memory of his younger self.
On Shelley’s ‘Tower’

Yeats’s theme was an ideal form, a symbol that remains out of reach of the poet’s grasp. The symbolism of men – as written about by Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, a book dedicated to Yeats – was always going to be inadequate. Life needs “the compromises of our intelligence, which save us”; its irony, in order to lessen the intensity of “that overpowering consciousness of our real position” (Symons 94). However, Symons was threatened by the beauty of words more than Yeats was. The difference between a symbol and an image, which continued to lie on the conscience of a Symbolist poet, could be removed:

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Things said or done long years ago,
Or things I did not do or say
But thought that I might say or do,
Weigh me down, and not a day
But something is recalled,
My conscience or my vanity appalled. (“Vacillation” 51 - 56)
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Symbolism continued to suggest to Yeats the use of a precise expression valuable to him as a poet. Yeats reflected the constraints of symbolist art by bringing together two wholes of his work. His early and later work provided a structure of experience that could be reflected upon, which is what Yeats’s “personal utterance” undertook. Likewise, he saw how symbolism, after romanticism, could reflect the union between a private symbol and a public image, ‘[t]he three-fold terror of love’ (“The Mother of God” 1). As such, the later Yeats offered a way of cohering and ordering a mythical body of work, a medium derived from what Terence Brown calls “the tragic ambiguities of historic experience” (*Ireland’s Literature* 88).

As a poem that was written to explain the importance of its system in *Vision*, “The Phases of the Moon” ends with the prophecy that: ‘The light in the tower window was put out’ (139). As we will see, although Shelley’s ‘tower’ represented a known symbol, its feeling lies in the commanding manner in which it came to be
conveyed in its new setting, as the consequence of a symbolism that was shaped by the context of Yeats’s poetry. Not only was it “important in Maeterlinck, as in Shelley” (*E&I* 87), it was also symbolic for Yeats of “[t]he castle, which we call *Thoor* (Tower),” where it was important that it also “escape from associations of modern gothic.” A subject that grows clearer in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, as he tells Olivia Shakespear in a letter dated June 7 1922, as we will see, the ‘tower’ established a point of view which became clearer through the course of his personal life and career: “Stone stairs to my surprise are the most silent of all stairs and sitting as I am now upstairs in the Tower I have a sense of solitude and silence” (*CL* 686). Therefore, a Yeatsian context and influence may be much closer to us than the seeming digressions that he increasingly involved in his musings about symbols in his thought, of which the “very ancient *symbol*” (*E&I* 87, emphasis added) of the tower was one.

In a single symbol of the tower, we see the potential for a Yeatsian form, the seed of an autobiographical style. Yeats had deliberately used Shelley’s tower – to critique as well as contradict the work of nature in the lyric. Such a symbol was not merely evidence of the poet working under his shadow. Its occurrence, within “Blood and the Moon,” serves as a re-reading of Shelley’s symbol; yet, in this way, adopting the symbol as its surrounding context.

The visibility offered by a Romantic tradition, as opposed to a romantic medium, meant that there had to be a way to reconcile its different aims: through a metaphysical medium that Shelley’s symbols represented for Yeats, and which may explain the importance of ‘the winding stair’ that reaches back in history. Katarzyna Murawska tells us that Shelley had discovered two different mediums to highlight two different sides, if not also two different interpretations, of a single symbol. In the first,
“he links the meditating occupant of a tower with the image of the lonely hermitage” while the second demonstrates “the tower as a place of escape and hiding for lovers, [and] is associated directly with the motif of an island.” She suggests that they add to the significance of the original use of the word because:

Both these images, of the hermitage and the island, belong to longstanding literary or iconographical traditions, and while they both express a form of separation from the world, they are both taken up by art and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and thus in turn extend the implicit escapism embodied in the tower symbol. (154-55)

In approaching this subject in his mature work, Yeats suggests that the two aspects of the romantic image had to be represented as distinct phases in the poet’s poetry, such that the heritage of romantic poetry belongs more fully to its readers, and not just to the poet.

Yeats, in “Blood and the Moon,” suggested the concord of Shelley’s image by making it the source of two images, made possible by a “second reading” of it, something that is integral to his poetics (Murawska 154). Such a “reading” of the romantic image simulates the actual process undergone for the symbol to be an effective medium for the poet concerned. The Romantic image of the sublime, Shelley’s ‘thought’s crowned powers’ (“Blood and the Moon” 15), finds a way to be communicated, as an internal dichotomy belonging to the romantic symbol. In the “Anima Mundi” section of Per Amica Silentia Lunae, Yeats declares: “The books say that our happiness comes from the opposite of hate, but I am not certain, for we may love unhappily” (CW5 31). Yeats’s later symbolism exceeded what “[t]he books say”; that is, an already-existing dimension of symbolism, but for this reason, he risked alienating his critics from the objective or moral of his image. At the same time, what “lov[ing] unhappily” offered Yeats was an opportunity to engage with the work of words as symbols, innate in any theory of the image.
It was this aspect of Yeats’s art, rather than the abandonment of mythology, that made him a modern poet. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot wrote that:

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and expressions combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. (Sacred Wood 56; emphasis added)

Although Eliot’s poet is obviously at the centre of it all, he is not the source of meaning. Yeats had something that Eliot did not have: a symbolic place or landscape from which the poet could speak his mind, unself-conscious of the meaning of his symbols. Where Shelley’s ‘tower’ was concerned, Yeats refined his image and free it into a symbol that distinguishes it as a medium: “The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life” (E&I 87). What the above results in is an elevation of the Romantic poet into a “medium” belonging to a more perfect work of art. However, such a poet embodies a form of modern consciousness that not even the dramatist in a poet possesses, at least according to Eliot, in being without “a ‘personality’ to express.”

The suggestion of a symbol is that it contains a pattern for the formation of other symbols. This was the structure that Yeats increasingly reflected in his later work, a reflection of two different moments in his oeuvre, and which the symbol of the tower was a sign of, as he attests to in his essay on “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”:

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and
shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature.

By “ancient symbols,” Yeats meant symbols that are unable to be traced in history to their sources, and are thereby able to generate meanings that have not yet been emphasised.

Therefore, instead of taking advantage of an established medium, Yeats shows us that any initiative at all in terms of “the structural emotion, provided by the drama” (Sacred Wood 57) belongs to an older, less popular, understanding of the theatre. In his 1903 essay from “Samhain,” “The Reform of the Theatre,” Yeats initiates an understanding of the poet’s relation to the form, but only to evaluate the lyrical medium as an ideal romantic art:

If we do not know how to construct, if we cannot arrange much complicated life into a single action, our work will not hold the attention or linger in the memory, but if we are not in love with words it will lack the delicate movement of living speech that is the chief garment of life; and because of this lack the great realists seem to the lovers of beautiful art to be wise in this generation, and for the next generation, perhaps, but not for all generations that are to come. (CW8 27)

Yeats proves that what is needed is the visualisation of a more accurate way of approaching the poet’s medium as an instrument of thought. We as readers are on the receiving end of the passion that has gone into the creation of that speech – both realistic as well as the symbolical suggestion of a medium able to refrain from the determinism of a poet’s words. What made his “living speech” magical, therefore, is the avoidance of a discursive subject. Yet, critics may not finally criticise Yeats’s lyrics for lacking in any action.
Part and Whole

In “Yeats and His Symbols,” right after declaring that “[Yeats] was a great poet—if there are readers who cannot bear to have the ultimate adjective withheld,” John Crowe Ransom makes this interesting comment about him, at the start of a new paragraph: “He might have failed on the whole, as he did in many poems, if he had not been driven by a powerful sense of vocation” (309). Ransom suggests that the foundation of Yeats’s images is that they had served a purpose, perhaps precisely where it is not immediately apparent to readers. The undeniable influence of a medium which was “a revelation, and not a criticism” (E&I 197) was not merely a declaration of poetic intent but its fulfillment. Yeats was creating an altogether ‘new’ literary standard for writers. ‘A spot whereon the founders lived and died’ (“Coole and Ballylee” 33) could be read as the inheritance that he sought from his “Unity of Being,” or what Eliot called the “substantial unity of the soul.” In this way, ‘Nature’ in the poem does not represent a nostalgia for a Romantic past. Rather, it becomes the source of imaginative “action,” a symbol of the modern genius, something that will be discussed further in the following chapters.

Having “a powerful sense of vocation” meant that Yeats would only have been the first one in English poetry to be given the consideration belonging to a symbolist poet, apart from Blake who, according to Ransom, in a different way from Shakespeare, escaped “the understanding of [his] times” (E&I 111). The absence of a metaphysical system of beauty meant that the poet himself could demonstrate the very kind of attention he hoped to seek from his audience: ‘Maybe an image is too strong / Or maybe is not strong enough’ (“Michael Robartes and the Dancer” 37-38). This is important when one attempts to read The Winding Stair and Other Poems as a complete collection, because the evidence of this does not lie with the poems, but
rather, the strength of his images, if there are in fact symbols that hold the collection together, as these lines from from “Symbols” demonstrate: ‘Gold-sewn silk on the sword-blade, / Beauty and fool together laid’ (5-6). We do not have to look far for the source of aesthetic judement in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* that is inherent in an unerring ability in Yeats’s symbols to foil both reader and critic by exploring an impersonality that is both new, and therefore beautiful, as well as only gained through particular contexts belonging to his work.

In the collection, Yeats could be read as having achieved an image of art that goes beyond the success of previous collections, resulting in the reinterpretation of the place of poetic inspiration in symbolic creation, as Donoghue points out in his essay “*On the Winding Stair*”:

Yeats, not Nature, has pulled the tragic buskin on, and the rant is his own. One has only to recall Coleridge’s ‘Dejection’ to see that Yeats’s lines are a Romantic commonplace devoid of Coleridge’s tact. Yeats is planting himself in front of a suitably grandiose backcloth; he is worried about the décor, not about reality and justice. (*We Irish* 83)

That “suitably grandiose backcloth” is a way of summarising the irrevocability of his images. The pathos from ‘Nature’ has become anti-climatic, for which we can only mourn a loss of value, for there appears to be no way for the image to be restored to its primary role as the centre of Romantic art. Yet, as Donoghue says, the lines are derived from a strange confidence in ‘Nature,’ as if there were some kind of armour sown onto its image, a solidarity of feeling that the following lines from “The Choice” demonstrate: ‘In luck or out the toil has left it mark: / That old perplexity an empty purse’ (7-8). Similarly, we are unable to decide if the critique of the image is a necessary result of the construction of ‘Nature,’ or if it shows a lack of anticipation in its regard, despite its appearance in a key poem in the collection. The irony of ‘an
empty purse’ is weighed down by the potential symbolism of the poem, as well as the entire collection.

The use of the image of ‘Nature’ is, thus, a critique of the manner of its presentation, but indeed an exemplary one, despite the inability to explain or be expressive of the poet’s intended image, that in some way goes beyond what is contained in the poem, “Coole and Ballylee.” In “Symbols,” a poem created as a series of couplet-stanzas, what we have is a treatment of beauty where its aesthetic is bound to both the image and its use in the poem: ‘All-destroying sword-blade still / Carried by the wandering fool’ (3-4). The opening lines assure us that such a ‘reality’ is history’s gift to us: ‘A storm-beaten old watch-tower, / A blind hermit rings the hour’ (1-2). The logic behind the ‘Nature’ in “Coole and Ballylee” may appear unconscious and even misguided. Yet, it is precisely because it shows that the symbolism of the word is not an ordinary one, but rather, a symbolic medium that invites associations with other images of the same kind or nature. Yeats, in effect, unites the poetic and prosaic line.

In having a bearing that could be read to be almost noble, then, we might be tempted to think that ‘Nature’ has become a distinct lithographic symbol within the poem. In other words, the burden of its representation is for its idiosyncrasy; thus, not merely as we might love our own images, or our own voices. Yeats comes full circle, and finds adequate representation for the image that held its own in contemporary thought – for instance, through the efforts of his friend, Ezra Pound. The image was no longer a gesture of Romantic art; yet for this reason, it has become even more important, as a reflection of the intensity of nonrepresentative art.

It was important for Yeats to offer a critique of the English canon, but this was a place where his poetics was already getting him to. As might be seen from the
layering of the symbolism belonging to “Blood and the Moon,” any resistance of external interests is also a desire to be interpreted against that very context. Similarly, the line, ‘Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!’ from “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (65-67) depicts an attitude of mind that is necessary to the collection, and the very source of images that is found in answer to the hypothetical contexts against which they are formed. As such, the symbolic force of a ‘bloodly, arrogant power’ (“Blood and the Moon” 3) implies violence necessary to any context where an image resides. Moreover, such a ‘force’ is found in a medium that acts as a reintroduction to the implication of the present poetic context, for an audience who appears to have moved on from Yeats’s early work: ‘Is every modern nation like the tower, / Half dead at the top? No matter what I said, / For wisdom is the property of the dead, / A something incompatible with life’ (47-50).

The rhetorical question posed above is a comment about what the poem manages to capture: a ‘unity’ without artistic restraint. In fact, ‘[a] something incompatible with life’ is the reflection of a different kind of sublimity altogether which, instead of abandoning form or beauty, deflects our attention from the implicit didacticism of the occasion – the image of ‘Nature’ that appears to capture a subject that creates a different kind of unity between the poems in the collection. The image becomes a context where we are reminded of a medium that Yeats is conscious of writing from, as the subject of modern poetry: ‘Blessed be this place, / More blessed still this tower’ (1-2). Peter Ure argues that many poems in The Tower and The Winding Stair “because they are less preoccupied with the poet’s personality, less ‘wound in mind’s wandering,” . . . move into a clearer, sharper air, losing as they go, it is true, that complexity of image and richness of language which marks Yeats’s best work” (76). Precisely as such, to judge them for their own sake appears to be the work
of a different imagination – “less ‘wound in mind’s wandering,’” as Ure puts it, citing “All Soul’s Night.”

Moreover, Yeats does not have “Coleridge’s tact,” as Donoghue says in relation to the particular line where ‘Nature’ appears without the subtlety of action expected of the poet. Nonetheless, the poet was able to prove that the inherent ‘power’ of symbols was no longer what was represented in the poetry, and indeed as Yeats’s critics show us, the actual subject of his work is not easily explained. Symons argues that poetry should not be resorted to as a vehicle of expression, but in this way, the medium could mean something without resorting to rhetoric: “The further I can extend my prose, the further back do I set the limits of verse. The region of poetry will thus be always the beyond, the ultimate, and with the least possible chance of any confusion of territory” (Romantic Movement 9). In other words, what there is for the poet is a medium that is a subject or personality that may or may not result in its discursive form. In fact, “the beyond, the ultimate” already suggest possible ambiguity, despite the rationale of the distinction between ‘prose’ and ‘verse.’ The necessity and significance of ‘Nature,’ despite the peculiar taste with which it is presented, showed that the image was, rather, an escape from imitation.
On ‘the Winding Stair’

Yeats shows what it means for a poet to properly distinguish the ‘beautiful’ object in discursive thought from the elusive quality of lyrical beauty, precisely by showing that what preserves Romantic art is the notoriety of the tradition. It was with the benefit of hindsight that Yeats had written: “One thing I had not foreseen when I accepted so joyfully the doctrine of personal utterance was that it involved the man that lived it [in] a tumultuous life” (qtd. in Schuchard 29). Yeats had found an escape from the “wish-fulfilment” (Bush 528) of Romanticism, through a medium that continued to address the problems of the poetic tradition. This chapter discusses in relation to *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* a ‘medium’ that belongs to an artist in pursuit of the ‘beautiful’:

> Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
> Shade more than man, more image than a shade;  
> For hades’ bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
> May unwind the winding path . . . (‘Byzantium’ 9-12)

Therefore, the ghost of Shelley is implied here, albeit in close proximity with the destructive elements of a newly transformed emotional reality: “as in Byzantine painting, where there is no mass, nothing in relief” (*E&I* 243).

It was not just Shelley’s influence in particular that suggested the necessity of preserving the fate of Romantic art as a theme in Yeats’s work. The type of reception in Yeats’s aesthetic granting its symbolisation and source presents to the reader various personalities, including Shelley, that made the theme necessary. Donoghue points out in his introduction to Yeats’s *Memoirs* that:

> Yeats is not given to the intrinsic pleasure of confession, he is concerned with the meaning of a life, not with its mere content. Besides, the reality mediated by autobiography is to Yeats as much social as personal. He does not scorn the private life, but he assumes that the available meaning of a man’s life is the relation between that life and the society which, in part, it defines. (9-10)
The sacrifice of a symbolism that accommodates a more public life, in favour of a ‘life’ that encompasses both a man’s life and the one he represents, may explain the subject of these lines from “Blood and the Moon”: ‘Odour of blood on the stair! / And we that have shed none must gather there / And clamour in drunken frenzy for the moon’ (40-42). The collective noun here ‘gather[s]’ even those whose society is not found within the emotional compass of his system of symbolism.

Yeats sought, as he described it in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, provisionally dated Dec. 22 1935, not a way of imitating “a natural speech.” Instead, he saw in Lady Dorothy’s work what he had perceived for his forms of speech, of which Byzantium was an example, ‘[w]here blood-begotten spirits come / And all complexities of fury leave’ (“Byzantium” 28-29). Highlighting, instead of the source of speech, a particular utterance, the importance of a single image like Byzantium was due to the discovery of a ‘created’ speech, at least from the point of view of the collection. What was an agreement with its myth in Lady Dorothy’s work, he also sought in his own work: “With you it is not a question of the speech of the common people—as with Synge and Lady Gregory—but the common speech of the people” (LP 45).

The search for a purpose or goal for a writer is inherent in “the common speech of the people.” It was important that it exists; however, Yeats entertains something more than its mere supposition. In “For Anne Gregory,” he suggests that such “speech” needs to be contextually bound: ‘a text to prove / That only God, my dear, / Could love you for yourself alone / And not your yellow hair’ (15-18). Not that it has always been so; instead, the authenticity of his lyrical subject wholly depends on her corresponding reality – whether ‘Brown, or black, or carrot’ (9). More than a statement of the truth, this is how Yeats had sought the ‘beautiful’ from out of his
images, and which like ‘Byzantium,’ meant that it belonged slightly apart from the present interpretative context.

Moreover, responsibility for a symbolic context for the ‘beautiful,’ as Yeats implies, relies on the difficulties of comparing a subjective with an objective vision. Indeed, the impression is what matters in relation to the ‘thought’s crowned powers’ of Shelley’s ‘towers’ where the poet preserves an antithetical vision by necessitating the crucial abandonment of Romantic sources of beauty, in favour of purely poetic or imaginative speech:

Fly-catchers of the moon,
Our hands are blench’d, our fingers seem
But slender needles of bone;
Blenched by that malicious dream
They are spread wide that each
May rend what comes in reach. (“The Crazed Moon” 13-18)

A visible source of the Romantic imagination, Shelley’s ‘towers’ have come to represent an assertion of its symbolic context – as ‘[t]he image of such politics’ which completes the symbolism of Yeats’s later work.

In this way, the past no longer holds the mystery of Romantic art important to a poet who had declared: ‘We were the last romantics’ (41) in “Coole and Ballyee.” The collectivity of Romantic history has become the source of great personal turmoil; nonetheless, the conflict is not caused by an avowed sense of the singularity of its vision, but rather, it has become the very source of imagery contained in the poem.

The irony found in the discovery of ‘Another emblem there!’ (17) implies that Yeats’s poetics could now be expressed to a wider audience. Such an ‘emblem’ sets the tone for a symbolism that catches the reader up into the making of his symbolism:

And is so lovely that it sets to right
What knowledge or its lack had set awry,
So arrogantly pure, a child might think
It can be murdered with a spot of ink. (“Coole and Ballylee” 21-24)
Even with the evident importance of the symbol of Byzantium to *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, there is nothing quite like his “Coole” Poems – and, as a demonstration of its theme, their surrounding poems as well. In such a context, the poet understood that the consequences of the Romantic abstractions of his youth no longer limited his medium:

> Often at evening when a boy
> Would I carry to a friend –
> Hoping more substantial joy
> Did an older mind commend –
> Not such as are in Newton’s metaphor,
> But actual shells of Rosses’ level shore. (“At Algeciras: a Meditation upon Death” 7-12)

It ‘[w]ould,’ however, take ‘an older mind [to] commend’ the poet’s next phase of action. Shelley’s ‘towers’ brought him closer to that objective, on that ‘winding stair,’ where Yeats treated the work of symbolism and the tradition of Romantic art as equal forces, resulting in the knowledge that:

> All lives that has lived;
> So much is certain;
> Old sages were not deceived:
> Somewhere beyond the curtain
> Of distorting days
> Lives that lonely thing
> That shone before these eyes
> Targeted, trod like Spring. (“Quarrel in Old Age” 9-16)

The writing of ‘[a] moment’s memory to that laurelled head’ (“Coole Park” 32) is a tribute to the work of symbols, surely. Moreover, such an image reflects that Yeats had discovered a surer route to ‘[a] dance-like glory that those walls begot’ (“Coole Park” 8) than his Romantic forebears, ‘mounted in that saddle Homer rode’ (47). In this way, the connotation of hope associated with ‘Spring’ creates a dilemma for the artist for whom the source of beauty in art is no longer present except in theory.

The pressure to know the poem on a personal level or what lay ‘beyond the curtain’ of being has led to the creation of a lyrical subject for beauty, as evidenced by
the active presence of the image perceived in the final line; more a “meaning of a life” than a ‘content.’ Likewise, the pressure to formalise the artistic or creative impulse was the post-romantic vision of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. For a start, the arrangement of the 1929 collection, *The Winding Stair*, was irrevocably changed because of the new additions to it. By distinguishing itself from the first version, *The Winding Stair*, Yeats’s revised collection grants readers an image of a poet’s work whose revisions were final: an anticipation of not just the publication of a ‘Collected Poems’ but its entire process. Allan Gillis says that: “The closely interwoven nature of Yeats’s collections, and ultimately of his *Collected Poems*, creates a tapestry of echo and counter-echo, in which individual works of ‘unexpended energy’ interanimate, contradict, and reinforce one another” (158). The place of Yeats’s collections within that “tapestry” is only granted through a constancy of theme, yet in this way escapes the dogmatism of nature. *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* is an example of how each work within the whole simultaneously adds to its individual significance in relation to an implied theme. In this way, *A Woman Young and Old* may be read to be that emerging picture of Yeats’s hermeneutic identity (Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful* 25), and therefore important to *The Winding Stair* in its changed form.

The sequence of poems that is part of the 1933 collection treats whatever that has gone before as evidence of the necessary failure of romantic abstraction: ‘That they had brought no fabulous symbol there / But my heart’s victim and its torturer’ (“Her Vision in the Wood” 31-32). Instead of an artist who had to make a living, here there is the discovery that there is a burden that an artist can only deal with – the secret that there is a solution after all to the failure of the imagination, perhaps in ‘old age.’ That solution lies precisely in the lack of ‘guilt’ that the solution has been borne
by the same person, an artist who could now reconcile his past and present, his 
‘victim’ and ‘torturer’ found in a victory over Romantic history: ‘The lot of love is 
chosen. I learnt that much / Struggling for an image on the track / Of the whirling 
Zodiac’ (“Chosen” 1-3).

The final poem in the sequence ends with: ‘Pray I will and sing I must, / And 
yet I weep – Oedipus’ child / Descends into the loveless dust’ (“From the ‘Antigone’” 
14-16). These are the lines that end the collection – the identity of the child in the first 
poem, “Father and Child,” having been revealed as a poetic symbol discovered as part 
of a geneology; but also important for the implication of a history of beauty that only 
Yeats has made possible: ‘Being mentioned with a man / That has th 
(4-5). However, ‘That his hair is beautiful, / Cold as the March wind his eyes’ 
(7-8) intimates something beyond the heroic status of a poet; instead, the poem is 
Yeats’s main witness to his father that he has done his best by his art, even if it is in a 
medium that appears to undermine the work of beauty.

The poem, “Chosen” ends with the suggestion that, far from being a Romantic 
inheritance, it is the symbolism of Yeats’s Vision that allows The Winding Stair and 
Other Poems to be strongly persuasive in its theme: ‘The Zodiac is changed into a 
sphere’ (18). Yeats shares his theme with his readers in A Woman Young and Old as a 
way of reorientating them towards the motivation of his later work that reflects the 
implication of an aesthetic which conjures a ‘reality’ of feeling which we may 
imagine belonged to the poet’s personal narrative. Instead, the dramatic ‘realism’ of 
Words for Music Perhaps, the other sequence in the collection, is the result of 
abstraction that comes from a different source. Therefore,

The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night, 
That we descant and yet again descant 
Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song: 
Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant. (“After Long Silence” 6-8)

Instead of an image rediscovered in his mature years of the principle as well as product of a poet’s tumultuous life, he has made the latter a symbol of all life in this sequence. As for “those readers I most value, those who have read me many years” (AV 23), the ‘winding stair’ serves to underline the youthful symbolism of Yeats’s early thought which had become material for his later work. Yet, there are two possible approaches to his work, which the two sequences in The Winding Stair and Other Poems represent. It is only in A Woman Young and Old that romantic abstraction has been transformed into a new mysticism, while Words for Music Perhaps depicts a mode and a theme that is distinctly modern but which limits the representational capacity of his medium in a way that might be considered to be a more predictable approach to his subject of beauty.
The Absent Centre

The publication of *Vision*, itself bearing different versions of its namesake, had coincided with a turning point in Yeats’s career as demonstrated in *The Winding Stair and Others*. As “Her Triumph” shows us, the success of the ending sequence of the collection underlines how Yeats had found a way of reconciling his youthful longing for a mythology of beauty with a vital skepticism belonging to the modern age, something which I have argued in this chapter. The tale that he had to be ‘pardoned’ for telling in the ‘Introductory Rhymes’ to *Responsibilities* (*CP* 101), finds itself appearing again in the opening poem of his 1933 collection with even more conviction. In an interview with Ashton Stevens in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 30 January 1904, Yeats says that: “This age will stop nothing for poetry.” In comparison, “a modern public will tolerate the stopping of the action [of characters] for, say, wit. . . . The public may be stopped for wit” (*Foster* 1 536). Yeats was conscious of not just advancing his personal interest in the representation of beauty. He also furthered public interest when he explored the poetic medium as a means of interpreting the modern world, for which his mythical trope of ‘the winding stair’ served. Yeats had found an image that paradoxically coincided with the disappearance of eternal beauty in his work: ‘I know not what the younger dreams’ (“In Memory of” 10).

Through ‘[a]n image of such politics’ (13), Yeats shows us that he had found “the proper function of the poet.” Gadamer says that it is exhibited in “a shared saying, a saying that possesses absolute reality simply by virtue of its being said. The Greek word for this is *mythos*” (*Relevance of the Beautiful* 70). Not just an emotion belonging to a time past but brought into its more dramatic, as well as ideal, present, poetry is a context that Yeats masters. This is particularly so where his later work
confines our sympathy to an age where the interest in its myths is less substantial than
dramatic:

I mocked, being crazy, but you mastered it
And broke the chain and set my ankles free,
Saint George or else a pagan Persus;
And now we stare astonished at the sea,
And a miraculous strange bird shrieks at us. (“Her Triumph” 8 – 12)

The introduction of a “mythos” to a reading of Yeats’s images is the recognition of a
significant memory from childhood or youth – but the reader also notes that he has a
newfound muse. The consequences of an implied mysticism are my interest:
‘Overcome – O bitter sweetness’ (“From the ‘Antigone’” 1). It is a call to read the
political mood of his image, of which ‘Romantic Ireland’ is one, if only because the
context for reading it changed, in “Coole and Ballylee.”

Having been generally taken for granted by critics as a decision between
public and private spheres, it was not to be so for Yeats’s ‘Ireland,’ especially in the
context of modern poetry: ‘Overcome the Empyrean; hurl / Heaven and Earth out of
their places’ (7-8). Stephanie J. Pocock has said that: “Yeats’s political views
depended upon the maintenance of this liminal space; he supported the creation of a
nation in which poetry could be both created and understood, and he reacted both
politically and artistically when he felt that ideal threatened” (100). We may think of
his careful reference to Irish history through “dark” Raftery’s “cellar” drop’ in
“Coole and Ballylee” (4), but used here solely for the poet’s purposes, therefore
escaping the compromising position of a nationalist poet. Instead, there is the ongoing
mythology of an Irish past, now an image that he seeks but cannot find. As Frawley
says:

I would argue that Yeats himself begins the process of deconstructing the
image of which he was a final key architect: the architect whose task it is to
complete the externalities of a structure that has been in the making for several
centuries. And once the structure is completed, Yeats stands back and begins to undo some of his own work. (74-75)

It is at the point of undoing the very function of his ‘mythos,’ that Yeats ‘overcomes’ the isolation of art and introduces a vision of poetic reality. It was a context Yeats had developed for an Irish writer, an authority he wields that depended on his image.

On hindsight, ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone’ from “September 1913” was life-changing as a statement of the obvious: what was already ‘dead and gone’ had evolved into an easily overlooked image, but which has been literally transformed for us from the perspective of Yeats’s ‘Book of the People.’ The fact that this was the change that Yeats’s imagination wrought, without having to admit political reasons for it, suggests that the relationship between poetry and nature (in this case, the idea of nationhood) may be believed, and even sought after. Donoghue has written, in relation to the phrase in question: “For what else is Romantic Ireland but the assertion that a naive relation to an original or aboriginal Ireland is indeed possible?” (We Irish 31) What Yeats illuminates is an image of Ireland, with or without its intended image of the people of Ireland whose – as Heaney calls it, “self-gratification” – is replaced by its lyrical form (Government of the Tongue 99). However, all of this will not necessarily involve an image of the poet’s making; yet, ‘Romantic Ireland’ gives Yeats a hand in its construction, as Frawley has seen, precisely through its deconstruction.

Yeats’s image may be read within a context created by the poet, a context that spans two poems: “September 1913” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.” The former is an unwitting adherent of, in Frawley’s words, “a structure that has been in the making for several centuries,” yet also created from a fragment of Yeats’s personal history. The second poem, “Coole and Ballylee,” which reflects a different kind of historical record, could be argued to suggest an important re-reading of the image. In so doing,
the poem is able to contemplate on the symbol from the point of view of its construction, in a poem that incidentally refers us to the actual location of the ‘Tower’ at Ballylee which was an important Yeatsian icon. As David Ben-Merre says, “Yeats is both a political agent of Ireland (the ‘sixty-year-old smiling public man’ of “Among School Children”) and the author of its mythology. That the two—the political and the aesthetic—turn out to be similar projects speaks to Yeats’s continual search for unity” (72). They belonged to a unity, which, as it turns out, is synonymous with the later Yeats. Yeats was in possession of his own history in the making, made possible by his New Collected Poems, which came out in 1933, the same year as The Winding Stair and Other Poems; the ambiguity of dates suggesting that one was the making of the other, or that the poet when assembling the collection was thinking of the other.

It will be as if life had a beginning and an end, both foreseen, as well as yet to be written; the ‘book’ that Yeats continues to write even in his later years. Allan Gillis suggests that: “Coole’s ‘book of the people’ has vanished” (158). To appreciate its context, thus, we have to abandon the old precepts of poetic history, and register anew Yeats’s ‘great memory,’ which offers more than the continuity of tradition, but an ability to face its disappearance without the threat of the unknown: ‘And he that Attis’ image hangs between / That staring fury and the blind lush lead / May know not what he knows, but knows not grief” (“Vacillation” 16-18). The poet’s image that ‘hangs between’ shows that the poet can only go half the way with a medium that brought the Romantic tradition to Yeats: his ‘Romantic Ireland’ also predates it. Therefore, it continues to be an important image in Yeats’s ‘schoolroom’: ‘That I was blessèd and could bless’ (44).
The image made ‘Ireland’ the primary ‘mythos’ of Yeats’s later poetry, but also gave purpose to his lyrical vocation. “Vacillation” is a poem, as Gillis says, whose ‘victorious confrontation with negation also seems to have been a delayed response to the elegiac despondency of “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,” which stands as a gravestone to many of the aspirations that had driven Yeats’s life’s work’ (153). In other words, these two poems seem to be written to reflect two very different historical points of view; “Vacillation” conceding ‘[t]he image of such politics,’ that revealed Yeats’s primary source of images. However, it is in “Coole and Ballylee” that we find the ‘real’ meaning of Yeats’s eventual legacy for readers: ‘the swan,’ as ‘upon a darkening flood’ (“Coole and Ballylee” 48). Yeats actively referred readers to a part of his life that now consisted of the writing, and living of Vision.

The line: ‘But all is changed, that high horse riderless’ (46) reflects on both the course of modern poetry, and the poet’s own growth. The line suggests that Yeats’s respective relationships to post-romantic history and his own personal history could be encountered simultaneously by readers, having become equally important to Yeats. Donoghue has pointed out, in Yeats, on: “the impression, in Yeats’s early poems, of Nature as a heap of broken images, discontinuous, uncharted; of an abyss between one privileged moment and another” (29). In his later poetry, no longer are we looking for images that reflect the impersonality of ‘Nature’ which Donoghue is describing. What replaces its symbolic presence, then, is an opportunity for readers to treat Yeats as present in the history of his symbolic medium:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top. (“Vacillation” 35-39)
His poetry had become entrenched in a form of liberalism, which required him to exceed a more traditional understanding of symbolic art as the tragedy of the modern self.

The dawning of the chaos of modernity for Yeats did not inhibit an artist’s engagement with his subject: the symbolism of ‘Nature’ treated more directly as the poet’s medium. However, Yeats’s ‘great memory’ does not go as far as Hegel who suggests that ‘Nature’ is an extension of the personality of the poet, when he says that: “Nature, the externalised Spirit, is in its existence nothing but his eternal externalisation of its continuing existence and the movement which reinstates the Subject” (qtd. in Meltzer 67). In other words, Hegel is suggesting that the divine privilege of a poet, for he is one who engages with ‘Nature,’ is to stay alive, even in death. Yet, evidence of Yeats’s ‘great memory’ is gathered from the poet’s ‘vacillation’ on the meaning of events from history – including ‘[a]n open book and empty cup.’ “Vacillation” is a symbolic event that does not deduce or conclude on the poet’s ‘subject’ in the way that Hegel’s mythology of the “externalised Spirit” attempts to. As such, it is in relation to the poet’s afterlife that Yeats appears to differ from Hegel.

Nonetheless, Hegel’s ‘Nature’ is a route that reflects Yeats’s own interest in the treatment of ‘Nature’ as an epistemology present within the arrangement of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. As Donoghue says:

Symbolism offered the possibility of establishing a continuous life of energy at a level beneath that of time and history, but it did not help Yeats to understand his own moment in historical experience. In fact, Yeats hoped to blur the distinction between history and myth, thinking rather of moments certified by feeling. (*Yeats* 29-30)

What Yeats presents in “Coole Park,” as well as the rendering of its theme in “Coole and Ballylee,” shows that they have been written to reflect the relationship between
“history and myth.” In fact, the constant presence of the other poem could be read as telling us that “Coole” was not just illustrative of an ideal place to writer, but rather, a necessary investment into a symbol required for the collection on the whole. Read together, they could serve an effect gained through Hegel’s “double gallery of pictures.” The first, “Coole Park,” is entirely an emblem of Lady Gregory’s generosity towards Yeats, and therefore presenting a “centre which represents the surface within it” (qtd. in Meltzer 47). The poem was written around the presence or memory of its guiding spirit even after his mentor’s departure, as reflected in its opening line: ‘I meditate upon a swallow’s flight’ (1). The poem that comes after, “Coole and Ballylee,” is different, in painting a “spherical surface” where the simple but startling absence of a setting distinguishes the poem from the rest of the collection.

Hegel wanted and sought the memory belonging to individuals to illustrate his description of dialectical ‘Nature’ – whereas, for Yeats, the elegiac nature of his theme helped him specifically to rediscover the intensity of a living memory. The effect on the following line depends on a certain amount of incredulity being granted: “Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood” (“Coole and Ballylee” 48). In short, Hegel’s history did not help solve the problem of Yeats’s autobiographical medium whose primary myth of a lyrical subject showed a style whose description was mastered by a man who situated himself within post-romantic history, through his ‘great memory.’ “Coole Park” itself, thus, qualifies as an important figure of the imagination – where ‘traveler, scholar, poet’ share the burden of Yeats’s momentous symbols; allusions to a form of memory not quite achieved through the study of Spenser’s ‘beautiful’ or Hegel’s ‘Nature’ – although there is also one exception.
The line: ‘mounted in that saddle Homer rode’ (“Coole and Ballylee” 47) is an image that does not just belong to the past; it could be treated as an ambiguous statement of the present as well, insisted upon through the modifier ‘Though’ that changes the complexion of the poem’s entire reality. This ‘reality’ belonged to the location and sweeping memory of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* that is ‘in nature’s spite’ (5). In this way, the feeling that accompanies the collection both departs from the impersonality of Yeats’s early poems, as well as the isolation of modern life belonging to “the printing-press” or “the literature of the ‘point of view’” (Donoghue, *Yeats* 28). These obstacles to the artistic life were replaced by an ‘image’ that was now an important resource, a sign of Yeats’s growing public influence, through his ‘mask’ whose success has provoked both critics and imitators alike across history.

In conclusion, Yeats’s commentary on art serves as key evidence of his attitude towards the craft of poetry, and its consequences on his ‘lyric.’ Instead of necessitating a separation of art from the imagination, it is in post-romantic ‘reality’ that the source of an ideal, if also elusive, poetic medium may be discovered. The fine balance between ‘art and reality’ is achieved through a dialectical process of envisioning ‘Nature’ in his work – demonstrative, as I argue, of the imagination of his later work. In the following chapters, I will consider how both Yeats and Mahon display the nature of its transgression, but also its peculiar pattern, in their respective work.
CHAPTER II: ‘AN ASPIRING SPIRIT’: POETIC MEDIUMS AND LYRICAL ART IN DEREK MAHON’S WORK

Introduction

As Michael Hinds says in his review of Mahon’s New Collected Poems, “Through his late refashioning, and for all of his literariness, Mahon is now seeking a broader demographic than the people who sit on panel discussions” (7). For Mahon, at least from The Hudson Letter onwards, it is about the writer at work, whose poetic craft is explored not just in his original work but in his translations as well, of plays as well as poems. In his own words, he is seeking the ‘myth’ of ‘the first whisper of art / withdrawn in its integrity, in its own / obscurity’ (“Harbour Lights” 85-87) – a theme belonging to the style of his later work, in Harbour Lights (2005), Life on Earth (2008) and An Autumn Wind (2011). Poetry, not unlike the visual arts, in Mahon’s hands, undertakes a responsibility that reinterprets the role of nature in art in relation to the contemporary canon. I discuss in this chapter how Mahon carves out nonverbal realities that are rooted in an understanding of poetic expression as the resistance of, if not also freedom from, form or convention. In particular, the poem for Mahon promises the resistance, of what might be more broadly called ‘literature,’ from commentary. Instead, the focus on the ‘medium,’ as it were, points to a form of feeling that merges lyrical experience with an imagined audience. I will examine poems in Mahon’s collections where nature appears to be at the heart of the work.

Mahon’s treatment of myth, even in his earlier work, has never been straightforward, as these lines from “Ovid in Tomis” tell us: ‘Pan is dead, and already / I feel an ancient / Unity leave the earth’ (115-17). Yet, one stanza later, we find the sympathy for a ‘Unity’ of feeling that is needed for the present age: ‘(It knows that I / Have exchanged belief / For documentation.)’ (121-23). ‘It’ belongs to a discernable
presence of someone out there ‘[t]o hear our choral odes’ (135). And in a much later poem, “Harbour Lights,” we see that ‘Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory’ (108) is both a witness and an appeal to a context that has nothing more to do with myth than his early poetry did.

Therefore, what remains after ‘Pan’ is an image that is precisely supported by rumours of its different forms: ‘the house is quiet, calm till the next storm’ (“Harbour Lights” 174). Alternatively, for the poet, as described for instance in “Biographia Literaria,” he sees symbolic art as ‘the frame . . . seized as if in a nightmare’ (26). The tricky thing about Mahon’s work is that it implicitly asks, and indeed suggests that poetry is written as an attempt to consider: what must a poet do to escape his reputation, if this is what he has?

Showing us what remains at stake in a theory of beauty, Symons says that: “The ideal of lyric poetry, certainly, is to be this passive, flawless medium for the deeper consciousness of things, the mysterious voice of that mystery which lies about us, out of which we have come, and into which we shall return. It is not without reason that we cannot analyse a perfect lyric” (Symbolic Movement 48). Mahon’s work suggests that the memory of ‘Pan,’ or the genius of nature, lingers on despite a context of literary significance that only apprehends his death – a myth equivalent to an art form that has survived postmodernism.

Yet, as a figure of speech, the spirit of ‘Pan’ belongs to a ‘world’ that surrounds his poetry, such that the poetic becomes an allegiance to an identity that is formed apart from mere sentiment:

Be patient with an old bloke; remember later one who, in his own strange, distracted youth awake to the cold stars for the harsh truth, now tilts a bottle to your open mouth. So drench the nappies; fluff, bubble and burp: I probably won’t be here when you’ve grown up. (“The Cloud Ceiling” 55-60)
The presence of myth does not represent a promise of a better future, for ‘[t]he new dark ages’ (‘Harbour Lights” 67) suggest that we are no closer to getting around the problem of the modern lyric. The above lines have been overtaken by the mood of its imperatives, and what results is literally a tone he achieves for a new generation of poets. It produces the hypothetical voice that a poet needs to create for himself, and the realisation that it needs to ‘fit’ his personality as well: ‘the faux schooner bearing a famous name, / a pocket cruise-ship like a video game’ (“Harbour Lights” 79-80).

The name that we see on each of Mahon’s publications is a catalyst for his role as a writer of original verse – as well as, perhaps equally, the presence of a translator of verse and plays. For the purpose of creating a more extensive consideration of his medium, Mahon attempts to reconcile the expression of the ‘literary’ with a form of poetic analysis that he calls ‘the open prison of the corporate whole’ in “Resistance Days” (78). In other words, what he seeks is a consciousness that has become elevated into a medium of thought: the elusive beauty behind ‘the corporate whole’ and its provocation of forms of intentionality. David G. Williams suggests that:

One manifestation of Mahon’s attachment to the culture of the book and the ‘pleasure of the text’ is his inclusion of many intertextual references. They have a distilled aptness of thought and expression or a personal talismanic value that is important for him to hold on to at a time of personal or cultural crisis. (“A Decadent Who Lived” 11)

‘Beauty is not enough’ is the continuing “crisis” of Mahon’s poetic text, and which suggests in this way, the source of “a personal talismanic value” in his most recent work that is difficult to pin down to a single mood.
Writing the ‘Body’

Donoghue has said that: “Writing is difficult for many reasons, including the fact that it cannot be present in the sense in which the voice is present to itself within the body” (Ferocious Alphabets 45). In other words, writing is not primarily important for the sake of self-discovery but is itself a form of discovery. Precisely for this reason, the writer’s perspective has become important. As an example of “the voice [that] is present to itself,” Mahon’s “Remembering the ‘90s,” the eighth poem of the sequence, The Yellow Book says, quotes Arthur Symons as saying that: ‘“Nothing, of course, not even conventional virtue / is so provincial as conventional vice” / — Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature’ (49-51). What can be taken forgranted is a perspective that makes the occupation of the symbolist poet provocative, one that bears demonstration. To show the central myth of his work, the poem, “Where to Hide” (HL 51), is captured entirely in parenthesis: ‘(Some derelict beach hut or abandoned wreck / as in that strange novel by Yann Queffélec’). There is a particular context for the writing of poetry, and what Mahon does is to demonstrate in “Where to Hide” the imaginative potential of a myth that reveals the very circumstances of a particular mode of presentation.

There is a structure of lyrical ideation on display that appears to grant to Mahon’s work an insistently ‘private’ symbolism, the character of which is explored but also critiqued in Harbour Lights. For reason of a purely poetic circumstance, a place like ‘Kinsale’ is referred to as having survived the pastiche of contemporary art: ‘I was here once before, though, at Kinsale’ (“Harbour Lights” 130). In a later reference in “Under the Volcanoes,” the subject has been slightly altered. ‘Kinsale’ has become symbolic in its connection for the poet personally: ‘When we get back to Kinsale / I sit late listening to an autumn wind’ (66-67). More than a preoccupation
with a specific memory, ‘Kinsale’ represents for Mahon a profession laid bare by its mode of presentation.

Moreover, the subject of the lyrical representation now shares the same literary mode as the identity of the implied author of the work. As such, what one might gather from ‘Kinsale’ is an essential subject of modernist poetics. At least for Mahon’s reader, it is important for its implicit narrative, and it is also a potential analogy for personalities further off from it as well. The manner in which Mahon plays up the idea of ‘Kinsale’ suggests that there is something at stake in its presentation. Yet, the choice of ‘Kinsale’ may be too self-evident in its connection to Mahon to have any bearing on the collection as the whole. Nonetheless, this serves his aesthetic purpose too, as the illustration of what Susanne Langer calls “the primary illusion of a perfectly visible and perfectly intelligible total space” (F&F 73). In “Under the Volcanoes,” ‘Kinsale’ has also come to represent a critique of Mahon’s poetic context. It is a symbol for an approach to poetry that animates the presentation of Mahon’s ‘lyrical’ theme.

Poetry is, of course, not always as inevitable as “the voice” Donoghue speaks of. However, it is what is stressed, through the interconnectedness of poetry and life, in his translation of Saint-John Perse’s Birds (2002) that demonstrates a ‘medium’ he embodies even more vividly as a translator. As a translator, Mahon appears to be able to write his own tale even better. Mahon’s version of Birds, we are told, was not the first one that made it to print, although it was the first of his experiments at translation. Beyond noting that Robert Fitzgerald’s version of Birds “has long been out of print,” Mahon claims that his version offers the first authoritative translation that is closest to: “[Perse’s] fusion of the expository and the lyrical [. . .] something rare in the genre.” Birds is an experiment, not just in poetic translation, but to create a
medium through which a poet may find a legitimate claim to his original work. His “Translator’s Note” interprets the subject of Birds for his reader, which incidentally merits the mention of Yeats: “Birds is about birds, but also about the artistic vocation itself, Yeats’s ‘lonely impulse of delight’” (9).

Mahon conceptualises his translation ‘work’ to further his career as a lyrical artist. Its poetic or aesthetic bias, however, relies on a suspension of disbelief – ‘the creative dream’ (33) of metaphors literally ‘in flight’ across the page. This was his real ‘idiom’: the forms that somehow travel even better on these pages than in a poem: “the present version, risking paraphrase, tries to find a more idiomatic mode without sacrificing the often incantatory tone characteristic of this extraordinary author.” If there is also a lofty aspiration towards an ‘original’ translation, however, it is because of the realisation that Mahon’s translation of Birds does not after all belong to a different medium than the ‘original’ material for his other collections. This myth of originality is something that is explored in this chapter in relation to the ‘lyric’ that is not a genre but a medium that expresses the relationship of the artist with his work.

The muse for Birds is a further illustration of the kind of ‘nature’ that is expressed in his collections. It belongs to a myth which Mahon foregrounds for his ‘perpetual summer’ (11), in this case, an exhibition of “bird lithographs by Georges Braque,” which Fitzgerald’s “scrupulous and literal” version (9) apparently missed. In other words, in Birds, one sees the attempt to encompass his poetic vocation into a single word or picture, with the finality of a translation. In this way, we have an essential approach to Mahon’s original work, which ideally retains the myth of an inexhaustible subject like beauty. It is the impression readers get in reading his highly allusive work, which an earlier poem that I will discuss later, “Rage for Order,” addresses (NCP 47-48). Donoghue says in Ferocious Alphabets that: “Completeness
is not a property of conversation, except in principle as the cooperation of the two
speakers. So it is considered vulgar for anyone in a conversation to claim the last
word” (44). The activity of translation, for Mahon, does not limit the subject to be
imitated. However, for this reason, it is the presentation of the work of art that
becomes important, particularly in relation to a living writer. How does one leave
language out in the open square of expression; not keep it to the separate corners of
the intellect? Therefore, the only acceptable response, as shown in “Rage for Order,”
is provided by the silence of “the last word.”

What the lyrical artist is self-conscious of, then, is “the last word,” which is
really a symbolic medium in its own right. Indeed, “the last word” is a dilemma for a
poet who is conscious of a political mode that is, on the contrary, “vulgar.” It is the
verbal imagination that is evidently at stake, as it was in Ezra Pound’s musical
aesthetics. Mahon’s own interest in the ‘musical’ form for his work results from the
dilemma of lyrical performance that resulted, for Pound, in a more authentic analysis
of poetic creation. The solution, as Schafer tells us, was to pursue something that was
more “procedure” than “form.” In other words, ‘musical’ form deflects interest from
commentary in favour of the autonomy of its medium:

Strictly speaking, the fugue is not a form at all, but rather a procedure. Unlike
the sonata, where the length and shape of the exposition determines the
development and recapitulation sections, the fugue regenerates itself
constantly from its own motivic material, according to the invention of the
composer. And it is judged by the craftsmanship of its texture rather than the
boldness of its form. . . . The fugue can end anywhere. Not with a cadencing
chain of fireworks, not with climax . . . rather with an unpretentious device,
often as brief as half a bar – the pedal. (Ezra Pound and Music 22)

The “fugue” form, in other words, takes us beyond the artistic process, for it also
deals with all the uncertainties involved in it. It stands for an alternative
understanding of form, precisely through ‘the anxiety of a last word’ (“Rage for
Order” 30). The responsibility of form to come to “completeness,” and even name itself, is a theme that may be discussed in relation to music.

The “fugue” was Schafer’s chosen defense of Pound’s *Cantos*, but also Yeats’s as well. With a similar awareness of the impact of ‘musical’ form in poetry, Mahon’s subject matter in “Rage for Order” demonstrates the thematic control necessary to the production of lyrical form, for which he injects what he calls ‘terminal ironies’ (40). The lyric, like the “fugue,” is the presence of the myth of lyrical cohesion or unity that is of central interest in poetic performance. As Langer says in *Feeling and Form*,

> An artistic symbol is a much more intricate thing than what we usually think of as a form, because it involves all the relationships of its elements to one another, all similarities and differences of quality, not only geometric or other familiar relations. That is why qualities enter directly into the form itself, not as its contents, but as constitutive elements in it. (51)

Before the occurrence of what we “think of as a form,” there is something even objective. It is found in a subject that bears an even more ‘ultimate’ presence than ‘form,’ which belongs to the poetic ‘life.’ In this way, we find possibly the most important purpose of Mahon’s work. By reflecting the mythology of art, he is also reflecting the mythology that any poet will have to endure as part of his vocation.

Schafer argues in relation to Pound’s *Cantos* that the epic poem has been wrongly treated to be an example of the absence of form, as it has been by critics: it was not “the kind of form with which the literary critic is familiar” (21). Like how the “fugue” is used to fend off a misunderstanding in relation to the use of ‘form’ in Pound’s work, the interrogation of lyrical form is a turning point within itself, rather than a sign of its exclusion from the poet’s work. To different extents, both Yeats and Mahon reflect how this turning point occurs within their respective work. As the “fugue” illustrates, a structure of irony is necessary for the appearance of ‘form’ to
not be mistaken with its ‘function.’ Mahon’s *An Autumn Wind* reflects how it is
‘form’ that comes first, but in a more didactic manner than what Yeats ventures in
relation to ‘musical’ form, which will be further discussed in Chapter Four. Yet, this
manner appears under the veneer of control. The description of Mahon by Brendan
Kennelly in “Derek Mahon’s humane perspective” is of the poet having a “calm and
dignified balance, quiet, not too dramatic, consciously educated, learned but not
pedantic, self aware and self mocking”; “the kind of voice that craves an eloquent
linguistic precision and often finds it” (148). We have to consider an “eloquent
linguistic precision” as an understanding of ‘form’ that Mahon sets up for his readers.
As an inspiration, ‘form’ is an attitude towards everything else, including the
“impression” of it – as eloquence, or the source of a writer’s familiarity with his
verbal medium.

Mahon’s poem shows that the insight belonging to his ‘terminal ironies’ treats
the promise of form or beauty as its own subject matter: ‘For even at one remove /
The thing I meant was love,’ as the painter from “The Forger” says. Mahon manages
the expectation of a ‘last word,’ by suggesting that it belongs to not just any kind of
spoken language – and therefore only ‘love’ can stand for the meaning it means for
the poet. Just as the “fugue” was a “procedure,” the language to speak of ‘form’ is
ultimately assured by not breaking the implicit silence of ‘form.’ As John Goodby
says, “There appears to be little ground between subservience and the vatic role
Mahon refuses” (169). The curious balance between ‘form’ and ‘function’ is
something that Mahon is more conscious of in “Rage for Order” than in his more
recently written, “Under the Volcanoes”:

If he is silent
It is the silence
Of enforced humility,
If anxious to be heard

85
It is the anxiety of a last word
When the drums start —
For his is a dying art. (26-32)

Like ‘dream’ and ‘dreamt,’ in this poem, Mahon gives us ‘silent’ and ‘silence,’
‘anxious’ and ‘anxiety,’ issuing to readers states of being that could be easily worn for
almost any subject matter. Yet, for this reason, they are able to carry readers to a
conclusion that is unexpected, ‘a dying art,’ quite literally in the poem, of the lyrical
subject. He entrusts to it the very appearance of order, as he does in The Yellow Book:
‘Everything aspires to the condition of rock music’ (11.1).

Form or beauty is that ‘dying art,’ particularly where the verbal medium is
concerned, and Mahon’s approach to it is both singular and uncompromising. Yet, for
this reason, Mahon’s “Under the Volcanoes” is characterised less by its message than
the difficulty of conveying it in his verse. It is in the very nature of Mahon’s
understanding of his subject matter that: ‘Best practice recommends we let it be, /
don’t force the issue of formality’ (“Under the Volcanoes” 84-85). Nonetheless, what
appears missing in “Under the Volcanoes” is how form or beauty needs ‘the shape of
a dream’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 12), words in their particular order, a reason to
believe that:

‘Everything can be remedied,’ thyme and sage
redeemed from fire, the most unpromising
material shaped into a living thing
outlasting winter to a temperate spring. (“Under the Volcanoes” 89-92)

With less subtlety, beauty only shows an untainted view of human nature, which
means that Mahon assumes then the responsibility of correcting it, conceding then to
a perception, of ‘[t]he thing I meant,’ many years after “Rage for Order.”

Inevitably, Mahon concretises the very impression of human nature he seems
bound to describe: ‘imposing chaos where I try to wring / form from the debris
choking up the mind’ (“Under the Volcanoes” 80-81). The awkwardness of ‘form from’ emphasised by being placed together at the start of a new line is deliberate, as is his ‘dying art’: ‘but the ancient rage / for order, the old curse, is too ingrained’ (“Under the Volcanoes” 87-88). The lines from Brian Merriman’s The Midnight Court illustrate a similar art: ‘No wonder my heart is filled with strain, / riddled by all these empty thoughts…’ (240). “Under the Volcanoes” shows a struggle in the poet that suggests that form and beauty for Mahon goes beyond the notion of an aesthetic authority, but its survival means more than a personal reputation. Corcoran says in “‘Persisting for the Unborn’: Derek Mahon’s Elegiac Poetics” that: “Mahon’s staunchly humane poetry depends on the manner in which life and death are suspended together in the curious condition of survival” (93). Mahon has no wish to abandon his lyrical subject, but the obstruction of human nature is the recognition of the “vatic role” it still plays, as it does in “Rage for Order”:

He is far
From his people,
And the fitful glare
Of his high window is as
Nothing to our scattered glass. (11-15)

What serves as comparison to ‘our scattered glass’ is the grim assessment of ‘Nothing.’ Nonetheless, at its bequest, such a theme gives both meaning and form to the poem, demonstrating how human nature becomes promising material for him.

What is at stake is precisely the bringing to pass of a symbol of feeling which Langer calls “created form” (68f), whose ‘form,’ however, threatens to become almost too literal in An Autumn Wind. Nevertheless, the poems ensure that it is not missed: ‘It’s easy to understand the flow of life / where everything fulfils its own nature’ (“Autumn Fields” 9-10). Likewise, the terminology of ‘chaos’ and ‘order’ in “Under the Volcanoes” appears almost too obvious, limiting his theme paradoxically
by showing to his readers that an ideal subject lies within reach, without being able to examine the origins of its feeling, which he does in “Rage for Order”: ‘An eddy of semantic scruple / In an unstructurable sea’ (9-10). His later poem departs from his ‘semantic scruple’ that allowed him to lay claim on a precise image of ‘an unstructurable sea,’ a phrase that catches the poem up in a feeling that goes beyond, yet rests with the particular phrasing. Like the silent last note of a “fugue,” the artist of beauty demonstrates that everything has been done to ensure the most precise figure of speech has been used, for the final image of the poem as a nondiscursive art form.
The ‘Blinding Surface’

Mahon’s poems suggest the presence of a symbol or presiding theme in his work that lends itself to the perspective of an artist. Louise Rosenblatt suggests that: “the aesthetic stance heightens awareness of the words as signs with particular visual and auditory characteristics and as symbols. What is lived through is felt constantly to be linked with the stimulus of the words” (29). They show how the context of a poem is the minimum for the imaginative potential of a symbol of feeling to be effected – although it is not an utopia, as Mahon makes it clear. As a ‘rhetorical / Device’ (“Rage for Order” 21-22) in An Autumn Wind, ‘form’ as traditionally thought also brings to our attention the lack of an overriding theme or subject. What saves it is the existence of the poem; as Robert Pinsky says: “The poem brings unconscious inward knowing together with conscious, outward knowing” (48). Thus, a poem is also a ‘fact’ that impacts on the ‘reality’ of the poem. This occurs as the ‘nature’ that is imposed on many of Mahon’s poems.

In this way, ‘order’ is a word conscious of the inability of its theme – which is a purely aesthetic one – to speak of itself, and whose practical application is present in what poets like Ezra Pound call a “vortex.” To show this, the “visual and auditory” projection of ‘form’ in “Under the Volcanoes” precisely signifies something that has “lived through” or survived the chaos of a postmodern reality. It is therefore less authentic than the preoccupation with ‘order’ in “Rage for Order,” where its subject becomes an integral reality in the context of a poem, if not also in its presentation.

What Mahon describes as a ‘semantic scruple’ in “Rage for Order” is a respect for the verbal stimulus of words whose signification goes beyond, as Rosenblatt argues, the particular formal traits of the work:

Often the literary experience is indeed more complex, more nuanced, more intense, because of the presence of certain stylistic devices or formal traits.
Yet the introduction of syntactic deviations from the norm, or rhyme or alliteration, into texts would not be sufficient in itself to raise their aesthetic value. (34)

As critics, we may become purveyors of the subject of ‘form,’ but its pronouncement as a symbol, as a certain ‘order’ of reality within the context of the poem, is not simply tied to its “particular visual and auditory characteristics.” Therefore, what Mahon needs ‘form’ to be is a symbol, and in this way, it becomes his ideal subject of beauty: “the poem” that is “lived through,” and which is “constantly . . . linked” to its identity simply by being present to be spoken of.

The subjectivity of the aesthetic perception necessitates what Ransom calls a “proper symbol” (“Yeats and His Symbols” 312), or the authority to speak of a particular ‘semantic order’ in words. In Philosophy in A New Key, Langer says that: “There is [ . . . ] a kind of symbolism peculiarly adapted to the explication of ‘unspeakable’ things, though it lacks the cardinal virtue of language, which is denotation. The most highly developed type of such purely connotational semantic is music.” These forms are important in so far as they expose the myth of the poet’s medium, calling for a more precise authority found in the illusion of order (what a “purely connotational semantic” appears to refer to) that is absent in the verbal genre. Langer’s “semantic” is only available to those with “a natural understanding of the medium, whom we describe, therefore, as ‘musical’” (PNK 101).

‘Musical’ explains what the ‘literary’ means for Langer’s theory of art. In a sense, what is dramatised in Mahon’s poetry is that the main work of poetry consists in proving ‘a different order or reality’ (“Remembering the ‘90s” 7) that is even more persuasive in not being inherent to the natural authority of his lyrical medium. In the second section of An Autumn Wind, “River of Stars,” we find the following lines in a poem attributed to ‘Tu Fu’:
I sit in the bamboo sunshine of my library,  
a straw hat over my eyes, a student  
of wind-blown pine cones, ants and midges,  
trivial things we tend to ignore.  
On my woodland walks I pause before  
the scents of willowherb and water mint. ("Autumn Fields" 19-24)

Reading poetry has become quite plainly a walk through nature. However, precisely so, the deliberateness of these lines, even if seemingly effortless in delivery, drives the reader back to the very perception of the words, for whose subject the poem is brought together: either compound, hyphenated, or single words. John Montague has said that: “the ease with which Northern poets, like Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, seem to move in the outside world may well derive from MacNeice’s restless photographic eye” (147). Yet, Montague is not interested in what might be called an “outside world,” but rather, in its description of a medium that Heaney and Mahon have each made his stamp on.

What Rosenblatt describes is far from being an inert text, for the determination to ‘strip’ poetry down to ‘what is’; that is, the precedence of formal authority resulting in the dilemma of lyrical form where Mahon is concerned, and which I have been arguing is precisely vivid as a dilemma. In “Harbour Lights,” then, Mahon attempts to frame the ‘what is’ as his medium: “the untaken photograph and the unwritten page” (62), a line from “Harbour Lights” that is incidentally also found on page sixty-two of Harbour Lights. The activity associated with the “outside world,” however, does not distinguish between styles. Instead, Montague emphasises it as a phenomena that exists in Northern Irish poetry. The “outside world,” then, is a trope that Mahon entertains in poems like “Harbour Lights,” but also in the logic and purpose of many of his poetic lines: ‘alternate light and shade on the shut eyes’ (“Harbour Lights” 61).

In this way, the themes of form and beauty provide a lyrical structure, which
Donoghue calls “formal eloquence” (OE 41), that makes the function of representation in Mahon’s work even more significant rather than less so.
Illusion of ‘Form’

Mahon shows that it is through a definite interest in the representation of musical feeling that poetic form becomes something more than a rhetorical device for artists. He implicitly suggests this possibility for Northern Irish poetry: ‘Startling how fast a thing can integrate: / beneath those tiles some immigrant teenager / will write the unknown poetry of the future’ (55-57). This particular structure of feeling I will discuss in relation to Wagner’s definition of a “motif”: “A musical motive (Motiv) can produce a definite impression on the feeling, inciting it to a function akin to thought, only when the emotion uttered in that motive has been definitely conditioned by a definite object, and proclaimed by a definite individual before our eyes” (qtd. in Bucknell 30). Mahon creates an illusion of a Northern Irish poetry, whose ‘White page, dark world’ (“Harbour Lights” 161) is no longer obscure, but essential to the significance of the verbal world. The presence of such a ‘world’ in a collection like Harbour Lights may be explained in the way Wagner describes his influential “motif”: “[m]usic cannot think: but she can materialize thoughts …” (qtd. in Bucknell 29).

A “motif” is an undeniable tribute to the object that a poet chooses to represent, whose emphasis suggests that Mahon’s poetry both draws attention a particular world as well as one that is ‘fortuitous,’ in that the myth it evokes exists in relation to a medium already belonging to a verbal artist:

A grim summer, but if fortuitous light strikes the rubble and a sun-spoke pierces a cloud rift the meaning becomes clear. (“A Building Site” 26-30)

Like his ‘fortuitous metaphors’ that are described elsewhere, Mahon appears to suggest that the ‘living connection’ of words has become inherent, its created medium
no longer difficult to visualise. However, in *An Autumn Wind*, its myth, like ‘a cloud rift,’ has been ‘pierce[d]’ such that it appears there is no longer any real object to represent, at least in his poem. Nonetheless, the image is effective, because the poem does explain ‘the meaning’ that is represented instead. It represents a quality belonging to a nonverbal medium like Langer’s “virtual time,” which Donoghue calls “the only theory of music I found convincing” (*OE* 41). This amounts to making the poem speak for itself, and which “A Building Site” does, by calling up an implied work, described by Langer as a “musical illusion”; or a condition where “space may suddenly appear in music” (*F&F* 118).

Nonetheless, it is my argument that the reconciliation of themes or motifs is evident in Mahon’s more recent collections. They are ‘the meaning’ that Mahon may be read to be conveying in his work. These ‘mediums’ point to a perceivable reality that keeps its structure a mystery, something that we see in “A Game of Cards”:

> I listen to the languorous voice where your superior nature sings, a finer sound like organ pipe or lute, sweeter than harp-strings, and dote upon your skilful hands, the long fingers and pink nails designed to pluck a tremulous note or draw ink from quivering quills; the perfect opalescent breast no knight or knave has ever known, the slender body and slim waist: Blánaid, I play for you alone. (9-20)

The experience of the poem is not just described by the words but also stays with them: ‘pluck,’ ‘draw,’ ‘play,’ ‘sings.’ This is evident through the word ‘dote,’ suggesting a way of handling a particular subject matter, exposing a structure of feeling or anticipation: ‘Be generous with your secret love, / relieve me of my dubious hand’ (27-28).
Such a structure of surprise relies on something not already learnt beforehand: the subject of the poem that is its ‘languorous voice.’ The poem also seems to conceal its ‘literary’ claims: ‘your secret love.’ There might be a connection to the ‘inviolable voice’ (101) of the second section of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, named “A Game of Chess”: ‘And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / “Jug Jug” to dirty ears’ (102-3). Its ‘voice’ was necessary to convey the guilt of the modern consciousness, the pressure of an inevitable narrative: ‘And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door’ (137-38). The pursuit of eloquence in Mahon’s “A Game of Cards” and Eliot’s “A Game of Chess” appear similar but the emphasis in Mahon’s poem is not on the inner life of his characters. Something is consciously lost in Mahon’s poem – the innocence of the game, but not its myth, because reading the poem by encouraging associations with a broader canon of work is not a confidence that a single poem could possibly inspire. Yet, the connections *are* present in the poem.

In order for the mythical voice to be sustained, Mahon persuades us not ‘to banish shadow and the difficult spirit’ (“Harbour Lights” 167-68); that is, the secret of what his poems represent; for instance: ‘Sun-ripples on the trout-shimmering Bandon River / where on a clear day you can see for ever’ (“Harbour Lights” 58-59). The second line, apart from the most delicate of emphasis on ‘for ever,’ could be mistaken to be without an object despite its clarity. In Eliot’s poem, the word ‘demobbed’ (139) illustrates a completely other emotional reality, but not just for the persona: ‘I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself / HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME’ (140-41). The refrain is repeated till its irrevocable, and not just surprising, conclusion.

A structure that this chapter describes, known as musical form, removes the barrier of the narrative voice in written verse. As seen in “A Game of Cards,” the
‘illusion’ of space occurs where the poem emphasises its auditory reality, which is in turn a sequence of symbolic events, each being, as Donoghue says, “in its smaller way, a new instance of eloquence” (OE 79). In this manner, one stumbles onto this line in “The Widow of Kinsale”: ‘Now look at this eyepatch’ (36) – possibly the most important motif in the entire poem. In this way, Mahon’s “A Game of Chess” may be read as being primarily an interest in a structure of feeling that he is determined to prove exists, and which is central to reading, or ‘re-reading,’ “Harbour Lights”:

Outside the exhausted kids have wandered home;
the house is quiet, calm till the next storm:
when the time comes and if the coast is clear,
work in some sort of order, let me hear
the cries of children playing but not too near. (173-77)

We find ourselves understanding what he means by the ‘outside,’ just for a moment.

At the same time, the word draws us into its depths just like the perspective achieved through the generous foreground of the painting of “Kinsale” by Paul Henry on the cover of Harbour Lights.

The painting chosen as the cover of the 2005 collection may be treated as being in the style of a self-portrait. The realism portrayed is from an illusion of depth, a reflection of a separate presence not otherwise contained within its frame:

the pits and heights in intimate close-up,
her bowed head grave as through a telescope
as if aware of danger; for quite soon,
perhaps, we dump our rubbish on the moon. (163-66)

In being the exception, rather than the inevitable poetic event, ‘the moon’ signifies that, as readers, it is not possible to understand the whole enterprise of the aesthetic of Wagner’s musical “motif,” the dynamic belonging to Mahon’s seemingly spontaneous choice of symbol. Nonetheless, we find ourselves of kindred spirit, the desire for more than an informed aesthetic reality. His symbol is uncannily reminiscent of Yeats’s lunar system in A Vision. Yet, its potential is really discovered
in its ability to inform us of its discovery in the poem. The apprehension of an inner life belongs completely to the only person who can appreciate the stylistic twists in Mahon’s poetry: ‘for the tough nuts, imagining you fortunate, / will aim to get you with their curious hate’ (“Harbour Lights” 103-4).

Mahon challenges us to make sense of his artistic decisions, but the process of how they actually converge in a single theme, continues to be remarkable. As Donoghue puts it, “Expression is peremptory, it is its own reason” (OE 31). However, expression is not just our guide, it is a guard against it. The effect of Mahon’s employment of symbolic discourse implies a mood that varies between the poems in Harbour Lights; however, there is no single manifestation of it. Instead, there is a theme that is in itself an argument to be read in a particular manner: the musical motif that is ‘played’ up in “A Game of Chess.”

Alive to the scheme or structure of a feeling that Mahon grants readers access to are the following lines close to the beginning of the title poem of Harbour Lights:

Blow-in asylum and dormitory of privilege,
its dreamy woods are straight out of Chekhov,
quaint gardens made for 19th-century love;
trans-national, the skies are Indian skies,
the harbour lights Chinese or Japanese;
and certain thatchy corners the gull sees
keep the last traces of the bardic phase,
straw spaces echoing to disconsolate cries. (“Harbour Lights” 22-29)

The challenge for Mahon’s art is to discover a method or procedure for writing original poetry, much in the same way Pound inspired artists with his ‘musical’ poetics. In this way, Mahon reflects the logic of his themes or motifs: ‘the gull’ is an opportunity to ‘see’ things as clearly as possible: ‘trans-national, the skies are Indian skies, / the harbour lights Chinese or Japanese.’ These are languages as much as being valued for how each is the possibility of a known universal language.
Mahon’s poem relies on a certain duplicity precisely for this reason. The problem of poetic form is not yet resolved for the poet, as evident by the presence of a ‘Blow-in asylum and dormitory of privilege.’ Yet, there is an undeniable importance attached to words or phrases – everything could be his voice. What saves its sense of purpose or integrity is the fact that his voice is unable to be independent of these ‘straw spaces echoing to disconsolate cries.’ Instead of a critique on the terms in which these ‘spaces’ occur in his poetry, as in “A Game of Cards,” what follows is precisely the recognition of a poetic persona, only now bound to his own context:

I was here once before, though, at Kinsale
with the mad chiefs, and lived to tell the tale;
I too froze in the hills, first of the name
in Monaghan, great my pride and great my shame —
or was it a slander that we tipped them off,
old Hugh asking a quart of Power’s from Taaffe? (130-35)

The above seems to be a wry reference to his most loyal critic and biographer, Hugh Haughton, one that Mahon turns into an occasion to reflect on his poetic medium.

That Mahon himself becomes the author of “Harbour Lights” is part of the strategy of his symbolism, a creative attempt at describing the sources of a poet’s lyricism. The poem, as well as the vision of the collection, stood for a whole system of mythology – what Owen Barfield has called a “true metaphor” (Poetic Diction 91).

The whole truth of musical form includes the inherent irony of such a quest, something important for the serious artist to consider. As Barfield says: “Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities. As such the poet strives, by his own efforts, to see them, and to make others see them, again” (92). Each of the stanzas in “Harbour Lights” is not just a stanza in its own right, but rather, the poem also seems to hide the fact that they are stanzas. What this proves is that the stanza has become, rather than an institution, an
important reason for other motifs in Mahon’s work to exist, as on ‘the blinding surface’ of “Harbour Lights” (208). It is the promise of mythology, or Mahon’s “river of stars.”

The largely formless and uneven stanzas of “Resistance Days” and “Harbour Lights” respectively are a perfect place to emphasise the stanzaic forms that are a staple in Mahon’s art. Indeed, each stanza becomes an instance of what it also imitates, a structure belonging to the whole poem. What better ‘motif’ can there be, than one that is able to allude to its very image? The motifs of Harbour Lights contain the seed of the later collection; the illusion of space as an interpreted symbolism, ‘the frank stare of unpredictable youth’ that points to ‘an obvious truth’ (“Harbour Lights” 147, 146). The whole problem, then, as presented in Mahon’s art, is to deal with ‘an obvious truth.’ In this way, a confession of a ‘blinding surface’ is self-depreciating while the idea of ‘an aspiring spirit’ in the later collection seems to speak of having been brought to the limit of its significance, rather than inspired by a genuine discovery of form: ‘blithely ignoring the strict rules, my fond / desire will swim back through the icy water’ (“An Aspiring Spirit” 9, 7-8).

Instead of bringing our attention to the mechanics of form that we find in Harbour Lights, in An Autumn Wind, it appears that a fateful desire for form has become his new theme. Yet, even then, there is a feeling that Mahon is still able to preserve what is finally sacred to him, the real message of the collection not complete without registering a feeling of loss. There remains a receptive quotient of the individual spirit that pulls back from what is said; no longer sufficient is a conflict that happens only outwardly, as “A Quiet Spot” shows us (AAW 17). The danger of losing some idea of perfect individuality once there are words that interrupt that silence is at least honest to our ears. However, the collection falls short of being
elegiac material for a future collection, as *Harbour Lights* was. Simon Pomery, however, claims that *An Autumn Wind* is “an inherited autumnal harvest to be stored up for the future.” This suggests that its value, then, lies wholly in its ambition: “[Mahon’s] work suggests that poetry is a kind metempsychosis, a way of transmigrating thoughts to the mind of the reader. . . .”

Though, indeed, our concern with the poems themselves have not lessened, we are robbed of the usual scrupulous style that we have come to expect from Mahon, something which these lines from “An Aspiring Spirit” actually warn of:

> The final dark can take away my eyesight, obliterating the white blaze of day; it can release my soul and maybe gratify the anxious hope of an eternal light — (1-4)

In a way, Mahon has chosen, much as John Goodby has spoken of in relation to the poems in *The Hudson Letter* and *The Yellow Book*, “irony . . . at the expense of the present” (“The Soul of Silence” 223). This has important consequences, as the poem demonstrates, for central to the creation of Mahon’s poetic universe is, as he tells us, the ‘difficult spirit.’ In short, *An Autumn Wind* does not have the visionary quality of a real conflict in its portrayal of the artistic medium, even though it engages the discourse of form as its subject. Yet, the aesthetic value Mahon’s collection is rescued, in showing that ‘[t]he final dark’ finally grasps nothing else. In other words, Mahon leaves out background information necessary for reading his poem: the signification of his musical form. Precisely because of his valiant effort to emphasise it within his poetry, its theme is not obscure in being what he concedes to be *his* ‘aspiring spirit.’
**Analogy of the Poetic**

Mahon frames the lyric as a form that is unable to be anticipated, a dimension of feeling that is both poetic and exemplary for the creative artist: ‘Life is a dream, of course, as we all know, / but one to be dreamt in earnest even so’ (“The Cloud Ceiling” 39-40). In this way, the artist seeks a more perfect lyric: ‘in the empty silence where a myth might start / — flute-note, god-word — the first whisper of art’ (“Harbour Lights” 84-85). I discuss how the lyric becomes a medium of art that defines that universal place and situation, where the poetic sublime is concerned. The difference that Mahon’s work offers is that even this objective of art continues to be an unexpected one, just like his determination to show how ‘Life’ is the essential myth of ‘reality’ that is expressed through his investment into what he calls ‘fortuitous archetypes’ (“Resistance Days” 132). As a medium that serves a limited context, then, the poetic ‘dream’ is something to be registered in its entirety, rather than a statement about ‘Life’ in general; that is, apart from its lyrical transformation.

Rather wittily, nineteenth century Irish poète maudit James Clarence Mangan argues for what he calls an aesthetic quality of the “Misty” – which is “in fact, as it strikes us, but a loftier species of Sublime” (Selected Prose 48). The “new style” that belonged to Yeats’s contemporary consisted in part of “the transposing of a ‘prose’ sentence into verse or, at least, the sitting of a sentence in verse which would be sufficiently uninveted and direct, and so conversationally straightforward, as to gain the appearance of prose” (Mangan qtd. in Devine 149). Like Mangan before him, Mahon highlights a different medium that appears to be distinct from poetry, which he stakes his reputation on: what he calls ‘ephemeral prose’ (141). Evidence of what Edna Longley calls Mahon’s “yearning for the ultimate” (Poetry in the Wars 180) is similar to a symbolism that Mangan defines as something which does not impose or is
not an “imposture.” The “imposture” of the sublime, it is implied, had become “rather too common” in order to masquerade as the poetic voice. The “Misty” and the ‘ephemeral’ are common in that they offer to the poet what poetry no longer can “pass . . . off” as its own (Mangan, Selected Prose 49). The solution for both poets is found in the work of translation – the only place that can satisfy the ideal poetic art. In establishing a style worthy of his “German muse” (48), what Mangan’s translations of the poet Kerner refrain from is the temptation to attribute more to them than the necessity of the subject; otherwise, what one ends up with is something falsely emphatic.

An ambition that Mahon identifies in “Harbour Lights,” the reference to ‘ephemeral prose’ secures the mythology of sublime art, but also points to ‘verse’ as its primary medium of expression, as did Mangan as well. What makes ‘prose’ sublime, therefore, is that it is verse discovered as the result of the process of symbolisation. As Mangan quips in “Drop Forty-Four” from “A Sixty-Drop Dose of Laudanum,” what the poet needs is ‘a combination of the Sublime and the Sarcastic’ (182). With even more directness, the opening line of Mangan’s “Eight Stanzas” declares: ‘I wonder who on earth invented verse.’ What traditional verse needs is the action of ‘prose’ or the personality of its lyrical ‘dream.’ In this way, the lyric has become the recognition of a particular style of writing that both Mangan and Mahon aspire towards; exemplary forms of the sublime, which Symons has called in his book the “ascent of the spirit within us” (90).

Even where Mahon is writing in a declarative mode an utterance like ‘I’ is never simply a grammatical subject. In other words, unlike verse, prose involves some transference of knowledge to the written medium that is necessary. For Mahon, the lyric is able to transform an artistic space shared by many:
The secret source still running clean
of brick dust and detergent froth
that wither so much natural growth,
the woodpigeon, the thrush and wren
hide in the branches to discharge
soul music to the world at large. ("Growth" 19-24)

What is hidden is the ‘secret source’ of his sublime medium. It belongs to the ‘soul
music’; an elevation of verse to prose that is important, to use Angela Leighton’s
words, “as play, even as the playing of ‘lyres and flutes’, that it might have
something to say” (36). As shown in the poem above, ‘soul music’ represents the
beginnings of a myth contained within the lines, as the splendour of nature. Even
though, as Donoghue says, “The spatial figure is misleading, since it doesn’t hold for
each of the arts” (Practice of Reading 11), Mahon manipulates this fact by suggesting
that nature contains a vocabulary constructed on the pretext of a visual space as a key
to modernist art. Its author, not unlike a visual artist, is the condition for its beauty. As
such, the poem assumes our knowledge of the lyrical mode, and it is not incorrect
either, because it seems to have found an ideal language to speak of it.

In An Autumn Wind, we see a departure from ‘verse’ as a sublime medium,
which we have seen in Harbour Lights. No longer is the ‘sublime’ an obstruction to
the writer of verse, and he shows us why. In Mahon’s New Collected Poems, what we
inevitably note are the dispersed forms of ‘soul music’ that have been gathered to
show a new key to reading their original arrangements. At the same time, we assume
the poems take their original forms, and when they do not, quite unexpectedly despite
retaining their titles, even the idea of the poem as an intact form has been disturbed.
The purpose appears to be to show that each poem is on some level able to point to a
single personality that remains unchanged across the collection.

I suggest that, with his ‘ephemeral prose,’ Mahon has moved on to solving
Mangan’s conundrum of ‘the Sublime and the Sarcastic,’ proving how the medium of
verse might be taken to be an analogy for artists of other disciplines, particularly in relation to the depiction of artistic space. The ‘dream’ of the poet in *An Autumn Wind* is incidentally published in the same year as *New Collected Poems*, and its context is contemporary art. Rather than the matter of a poet’s individual style, Mahon is now interested in forms that exceed the contexts that made them valuable in the first place – including the medium of verse in relation to a sublime understanding of poetry.

Instead of a poem that encloses a particular interpretation of sublime art, a different symbolic ‘order’ is now in place, a symbolic landscape of individual words that are versions of nature. These words embody a structure for chaos that, as we will see, “Under the Volcanoes” intimates (*AAW* 51-53). *An Autumn Wind* is a blueprint for Mahon’s ‘dubious verse,’ whose believability depends on the effectiveness of what poetry is no longer: ‘ephemeral,’ that is. What *New Collected Poems* demonstrates, and *An Autumn Wind* appears to prepare us for, is that evoking a visual medium like ‘a painting’ necessarily requires a motif.

There are two different aspects of the sublime influence on the symbolic ‘order’ or medium of a ‘page’: one is visual and the other auditory, and each resembles the other for Mahon. In response to the comment in a 1991 interview that: “You’re fond of poems that begin with a painting,” he says that: “I’ve done too much of that. There’s something frantic about it; it’s a search for subject-matter - the circus animals’ desertion” (Myers 196). Correspondingly, what is important about the art of painting is that, without its medium, his ‘soul music’ is not able to exist, its canvas offers Mahon a ‘natural’ language, if not also an emotion or sensibility from nature. In the absence of a better metaphor, Calvin Bediant says that: “It is true that painters really can’t afford to demote space,” or in Wyndham Lewis’s words, the painter goes “fishing for the Whole” (qtd. in Bediant 106). There is something more important
than ‘a painting’ for the artist, and that belongs to, as Mahon appears to argue, an idea of a medium that merges the different arts, which the “virtual illusion” of music suggests according to Langer. The rationale for encouraging associations with different artistic mediums is given by Mahon, through his description of himself, as Patricia Horton notes, “as a poet without a ‘natural audience,’ in contrast to ‘a poet “of the native tradition”… [who] has this kind of racial memory and so on at his disposal and… knows exactly who he’s writing for’” (ctd. in 353). Music, like ‘painting,’ is a medium waiting for a metaphor to concretise it, a voice and a vision of contemporary poetry. Music is, quite literally, an artistic theme that Mahon turns to for his post-visionary world.

Mahon’s work demonstrates the very condition of poetic myth which goes beyond the popularity of a literary or “Irish renascence” (Myers 197). Although the poetic persona in Heaney’s poem, “The Birch Grove,” declares that ‘the human condition is private,’ the clarity of meaning in this line is essentially a triumph over the incommunicability of that experience, rather than a confrontation with that reality: “‘If art teaches us anything,’ he says, trumping life / With a quote, ‘it’s that the human condition is private’” (15-16). The poet gets away with a quote that of course contradicts any possibility of having a ‘private’ self, but only by sheer cunning.

While Heaney may be content to be wry about it – “what used to be called the music of the spheres” (WTA 15) as Mahon says – the effort necessary to preserve the human condition may in no way be taken for granted. Stealing it away from the persona, as Heaney does, poetic speech is precisely evidence of the myth of art just coming into being. It is the presence of a medium of thought that Freud describes in “Writers and Day-Dreaming” as “a day-dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory” (Art
and Literature 135), a medium that brings Mahon’s work closer to a language of sublime art. When he discovers that medium in An Autumn Wind, however, we may be forgiven to be a little disappointed, for the human condition appears to have been simply resorted to a plurality that draws almost everything into its ‘vortex.’
‘New Space’ and the Exploits of Form

The lyric represents for Mahon no less than an entire language and medium, belonging to an illusion of order that I discuss in relation to the thematic quality of musical form in Mahon’s work: “‘No art without the resistance of the medium’” (128), to cite a quote from Latin poet Raymond Chandler that frames “Resistance Days” (Scammell 5). In this way, Mahon’s notion of ‘literature’ fills a medium solely taken from an artist’s perspective. The manner of its representation is also literal, which “New Space” serves to depict, for instance, in the following lines:

doorknobs, utensils, toys and song,
the homespun that the peasants wore —
anything simple, strong and clean,
art that was modest, not a chore;
and rhyming verses, not too long,
that say exactly what they mean. (25-30)

Although Mahon hides an important word – ‘song’ – at the end of a list of things, its setting is not simply arbitrary, and in fact suggests that it is its own illustration, making the form essential to what it embodies. Indeed, the word is responsible for the expectation of more of such ‘songs’ suggesting that it has become a symbol in the simplest sense possible. Its connotation is that the new habitation of literary art is found within ‘the homespun that the peasants wore.’

As many of the poems in An Autumn Wind show, the potential of the genre of ‘literature’ is precisely evident when described by Emerson in “The Poet” that: “Bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind” (188). Yet, this is not achieved precisely by resisting a medium that is ‘closed’ rather than ‘open’ – which a song represents, according to Langer. Mahon’s use of the list demonstrates a process of conceiving a particular symbolism as the object of his work: ‘White page, dark world; wave theory; moon and pines: / thin as an aspirin that vast surface shines’ (“Harbour Lights” 161-62). If possible, such an order or ‘sequence’ imitates the use of
a musical score, for, like the writing of a list, one is unable to exhaust its given structure.

Like the cover of *An Autumn Wind*, the photograph of “Last Leaves” by Basil Blackshaw, the focus of these lines is in the preciseness of the shape and colour of the overriding artist’s impression of its theme that is ‘everywhere’ – whose import this section discusses in relation to lyrical art. According to Langer,

> All music creates an order of virtual time, in which its sonorous forms move in relation to each other—always and only to each other, for nothing else exists there. Virtual time is as separate from the sequence of actual happenings as virtual space from actual space. In the first place, it is entirely perceptible, through the agency of a single sense-hearing. There is no supplementing of one sort of experience by another. (*F&F* 109)

Therefore, instead of “the sequence of actual happenings,” one apprehends the experience of music as if it held the identity of the medium in question. Illustrating the nature of a motif, Donoghue says that: “a feeling for eloquence is likely to be gratified by sudden gestures, flares of spirit, words breaking free from every expectation, audacities of diction and syntax” (*OE* 20). Furthermore, there is no better description for music apart from its forms of feeling: “our ‘common-sense’ versions of time . . . [are] even more composite, heterogeneous, and fragmentary than our similar sense of space” (*F&F* 109). What the musician, thus, embodies is the absence of a theory of feeling that may suggest a presiding genius apart from the practical purpose of its forms for the artist, which includes rhythm.

In this way, Mahon espouses the connection of art to beauty; or at least, to what it entails – ‘the still living whole’ of *An Autumn Wind* (“New Space” 41). It suggests the possibility of poetic creation, which Coleridge has described as something apart from the “already existing and complete” (308). Mahon has claimed that: “Heaney is a Wordsworth man and I’m a Coleridge man. I love the poetry, and the trajectory of his life has always fascinated me. His Biographia is a complete mess,
but is still full of the most wonderful stuff” (qtd. in Wroe). Together with Yeats’s *Autobiographies*, MacNeice’s *The Strings are False*, Elizabeth Bishop’s *Complete Poems*, and Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, according to Nicholas Wroe, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* features as one of Mahon’s inspirations – and is indeed listed first in “A Sense of Place.” Romantic art allowed Mahon to consider the possibility ‘of living part-time in a subversive past’ (“Harbour Lights” 101).

Rather than a Romantic creed, in *Life on Earth*, the creation of a sense of “continuity” (Coleridge 223), as epitomised by the figure of Coleridge in “Biographia Literaria”: ‘a sage / escaped from the inanity’ placed in quotes (43-44), is what Mahon may be seen to be attempting as the key to the organisation of his work.

According to Leighton,

Coleridge, when he writes about forms, is writing about something which pivots between world and mind, bringing one into the other, either as an object or as an inspiration for poetry. But both the fixity of forms and their very active independence can be a problem. They either move too little, or move too much. (8)

Coleridge offers the critic, then, “forms” of eloquence by critiquing the “closed” poem. This implicitly promotes forms like the ‘song,’ as the resistance of the tradition, which is transformed in Mahon’s work through his ‘canonical’ poem.

In a similar way to how Langer speaks of “All music,” Mahon speaks of ‘all poetry’ in *An Autumn Wind* in terms of an ideal symbolic medium. Offering “the key to a radical difficulty in song writing,” Langer suggests that: “A poem that has perfect form, in which everything is said and nothing merely adumbrated, a work completely developed and closed, does not readily lend itself to composition. It will not give its literary form” (*F&F* 154; emphasis added). Apart from being a solution to “literary form,” Langer’s concern is with the “virtual space” implied in the construction of an individual poem. It is on the basis of a poem that the logic of the lyric rests.
Therefore, the act of writing is not the crisis of a lack of context or subject matter. However, it is also precisely the presence of an imaginative context that makes a poem, or its “significant unity,” the poetic genius Eliot describes in relation to the work of major poets (*On Poetry and Poets* 47), difficult to perceive.

An understanding of “composition” is the bedrock of Mahon’s work. By contrasting the completed poem from the song, Langer is able to stress the sincerity of her “created form,” just like how the lyrics of a song might fall into place on the basis of a melodic progression; one that, moreover, points to the whole image of the literary experience. Therefore, we are in the presence of the entire song with each rhythmic or melodic change, even though each note presents a different tension or mood. Therefore, what the poet is aware of is not just what is finally achieved, within the limits of poetic convention.

Indeed, the underlying tone of Mahon’s poetry is often denoted by the extravagant gestures of the comma, which joins things that may not otherwise have immediate significance. Increasingly, he makes it apparent how he alternates between the use of compound nouns and single-word nouns, so that while the presentation is consistently varied, seldom is its tone uneven. Every comma, semi-colon or conjunction, are meaningful in this way. In this way, the ‘song’ that addresses the formal desire belonging to an artist’s vision of poetic form, and its contents, emerges. Mahon is constantly creating language to point to that landscape – the language of lyrical form. As Eamon Grennan says in *Facing the Music*, “Such speech celebrates presence, turning away from those ‘meanings’ which history asks the poet to espouse” (264). The object being imitated in poetry, then, is both familiar and obscure to those who are not looking in the ‘right place’ (“Harbour Lights” 213).
Langer’s comparison between a “closed” poem and a form like the ‘song’ is dependent on the concept of a more “perfect” medium of the imagination. Where “composition” is concerned, the imaginative order of an artist’s ‘forms’ remains invariably important yet indescribable. An analogy to painting is helpful for this reason. According to Lessing in *Laocōön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*:

> It is an intrusion of the poet into the domain of the painter and a squandering of much imagination to no purpose when, in order to give the reader an idea of the whole, the poet enumerates one by one several parts of things which I must necessarily survey at one glance in nature if they are to give the effect of a whole. (486; emphasis added)

Lessing suggests that poetry, unlike painting, needs to acknowledge that it germinated as a complete idea. This is precisely the difficulty that the poetic imagination poses. Donoghue has suggested that Clive Bell’s ‘significant form’ might have far greater potential as a theory “if he dropped ‘Significant’ from it – ‘significant of what?’ – and stuck to formalism” (*SOB* 39). The poem, in other words, lacks a natural subject, while the painter has a whole view of its scene from nature.

As such, what the painter’s space disturbs is the generic ‘unity’ of a poem, according to Lessing. There is no visible symbol of ‘space’ for a verbal artist, unlike for a painter. The difficulty, then, in “composition” is to defer to the medium of art where there may not necessarily be a given message. Instead, it is a place where we ignore the silence

Of the infinite spaces

And concentrate instead
On the infinity
Under our very noses — (“Ovid in Tomis” 137-41)

What a poem *has* is the liberty of the expression of ‘infinity,’ a phenomenon that a painting naturally lacks in relying on the craft of a painter. A poem, as Lessing implies, has no such restrictions. It need not depend on the painter’s ability to imitate
nature. Nonetheless, the nonverbal material of colour and line, for instance, necessary for that imitation is not readily available to the poet, as it is for the painter. The “significant unity” of the poem is only available through the “whole” which is found in the completed work. Therefore, the only thing a poem can imitate is the medium of its expression – the lyric at its greatest potential as the source of all poetic action.

Therefore, the visibility of poetry, or the “whole,” as Lessing refers to it, is precisely reliant on its metaphoric inventions, the appearance of which exposes a medium particular to a poet – any poet. This is expressed by poetry as a form, and not just by the presence of a poet standing over his work of art. According to Grennan, this message is evident in Mahon’s work:

His affection for the phenomenological world makes itself felt in an almost neutral lyricism of naming. Making no harsh demands of us, his speech claims our attention by the simple luminosity of that which it names. Such a love for the object grows more intense as the surrounding circumstantial life grows bleaker. (264; emphasis added)

The poet has a double task of locating these ‘objects’ as well as bringing them to our attention – as ‘forms’ of nature. In this way, something is confirmed for us: the presence and importance of the context of a poem. It stands for the lyrical experience that is at stake, the pure perception of poetry and an intimation of a vehicle for the imitation of art.

The theme of an artist’s visual space is the very purpose of the imitation of nature, and what results is a poem’s nonverbal gesture: that “one glance in nature.” This is precisely the theme that is being explored here. As Henri Bergson says in The Creative Mind, “It is not in us, it is in them that we perceive objects; it is at least in them that we should perceive them if our perception was ‘pure’” (89-90). A painting and a poem, in their own ways, have its particular spatial and verbal claims. However, I also explore how a feeling of distance is essential to the transformation of a poem
into something it already is, in some ways: a nonverbal as well as nonspatial space for the different art forms.

Such a transformation of perception, which Mahon describes as a ‘new space,’ belongs to the artist’s outlook in relation to a specialised knowledge of beauty. Baudelaire’s painter and muse, Eugène Delacroix, describes his main occupation as the search for that elusive description of beauty: “And he was fond of repeating: ‘Since I consider the impression communicated by nature to the artist as the most important thing to translate, is it not necessary that he should be forearmed with all the quickest means of translation?’” (*The Painter of Modern Life* 63) I suggest that what Delacroix says here is more useful for interpreting poetry than painting. The painter’s understanding of ‘nature’ is precisely the illusion of space that a poet is concerned to represent. Rather than addressed as a separate theme, as I will demonstrate in relation to music, the lyric has its own innate theme.

‘Nature’ for Baudelaire and Delacroix alike represents an artistic medium that ensures it is necessary to deal with the ‘terms’ involved in what might be considered poetic language. To recall Barfield’s definition of mythology, the symbolism of a poem, through “the poet’s own efforts,” is a nod to the symbolic material of what it must *eventually* become to a mature poet: ‘The weight of a bone-handled knife / signifies more in human life / than our aesthetics ever can’ (“New Space” 37-39). A theme that overlaps between the different collections, there is something beyond ‘the death of language’ (“New Wave” 37). To discover it involves, as Mahon calls it in *Life on Earth*, ‘the sinister finance of a dark new age’ (“Biographia Literaria” 46), a playful tribute to his recent work no doubt. As “New Space” tells us, ‘form follows function’ (40). I argue how this understanding of space or the artistic medium is not
simply a style that is embraced by contemporary art. As a myth, it is essential to the making of the reputation of verbal artists – in particular, poets.
The ‘Self-styled’ Lyric

*An Autumn Wind* suggests that the “virtual space” of music, not unlike sublime verse, denotes an indeterminate period of artistic engagement. It could ideally refer readers to both his early and later work. In this way, music takes precedence in Mahon’s work as the “expressive symbol” (*F&F* 115), or source of a poetic structure of feeling waiting to be discovered in relation to the poetic genre as a medium of invention. The hypothesis presented in the final section of the collection that is named “Raw Material” ventures a prediction or result that is self-fulfilling, the proposition that: ‘If everything is water as the Greek said’ (“Water” 1). In this way, space, and the lyric, is the mythology essential to reading Mahon that *New Collected Poems* boldly constructs.

The importance of the opening line of the poem is in the presentation of a mythological reference easily missed, apart from the suggestion of an entirely poetic language. Its directness of engagement, as well as the symbol implied to be on display – ‘water’ – show that Mahon has managed to narrow his lyric down to a theme, which this chapter discusses. The opening poem to *Life on Earth*, “Ariadne on Naxos,” tells us that the interpretation of the ‘Greek’ context is an important one for the reader to note:

I can’t go home alive,
I who betrayed Crete to the foreigner.
Without my guidance and the spool of thread
I gave you in the maze, you would be dead. (19-22)

Yet, the reference to ‘the Greek’ in “Water” is as far back into history that one is allowed. Its only definite literary origin belongs to the poem. Apart from such a connection, explicated in the poem to be between the protagonist and “Ariadne on Naxos,” a medium known as ‘Crete’ might otherwise be mistaken to be a local
reference. There is, therefore, no ‘Greek’ reference, and yet it is on display in many of Mahon’s recent poems.

The allusion to ‘the Greek,’ then, is characteristic of Mahon’s self-effacing art. Yet, precisely so, there is no turning back from representing the artistic life whose feeling he draws readers closer to with its mythology. However, this is only if it does not also distance them, which is the risk that *An Autumn Wind* takes:

> Only material forms die
> says the *Gita*,
> the dusty soul within
> alone survives
> even as we discard
> one body for another. (“Raw Material” 10-15)

The poem is conscious of itself as sublime verse and therefore demonstrates the rejection of that reality necessary for these forms to make their presence felt. In contrast, *Harbour Lights* was an attempt to remove other influences, discarding the role that the mythological imagination plays in the process:

> remember later
> one who, in his own strange, distracted youth
> awake to the cold stars for the harsh truth,
> now tilts a bottle to your open mouth. (“The Cloud Ceiling” 55-58)

However, as the lines from “Raw Material” show us, it is no longer about a ‘who’ assumed to be beneath the words, as seen in the above lines. Rather, what we are conscious of is a ‘what’ or ‘thing.’ It is the material of a life that may be contrived from words alone:

> I’m less in love with the sublime,
> more interested in the neat rows
> laid out to raise the beans and peas,
> rosemary, parsley, sage and thyme. (“New Space” 33-36)

> Now symbolic of the craft of poetry, the lyric ‘I’ has come to be at one remove from the poetic ideal, while in *Harbour Lights*, it is clear that his identity is not inseparable from the given context:
In each of the collections that I have been referring to, there is an overt emphasis on the use of the lyrical ‘I’ – albeit with different results. In *An Autumn Wind*, it has become emphatic, while it is exposed in *Harbour Lights* as a myth. Its importance to the 2011 collection is evident, precisely in its introduction of the fictitious Hindi poet, Gopal Singh. Mahon has been described as: “Singh’s translator and progenitor in one” (Clare), encompassing the role of the poet, as well as its authorial pretext in terms of his ‘literary’ endeavour which this chapter explores. In *Life on Earth*, one actually encounters that poetic persona whose treatment we are told echoes the central purpose of the lyric. As one reads in the final poem collected under the sequence, “Art Notes” (*LOE* 31-39): ‘Space-time is a spun network where it falls / to a dash of paint and graphite, inks and oils, / dense atmospherics, bright transparencies’ (“Triptych” 17-19). Our sensible experience of art seems to have expanded, although only by contracting into what is before us, as the consequence of the intertextuality of Mahon’s work, and its particular treatment in relation to a musical theme.

Mahon’s ‘the unknown poetry of the future’ (“Harbour Lights” 57) is a reference point for the dynamic of his lyric that is an exploration of the knowledge of a medium that is increasingly evident in his translation work. ‘Be patient with an old bloke’ (“The Cloud Ceiling” 55), he says, suggesting that the myth of a lyrical self has been set aside, favouring that dynamic over the transparency of a mystical source of expression in *The Hudson Letter*, and its closely guarded theme of lyrical form: ‘A long time since the hearties and the aesthetes, / imperious questors and saint-faced degenerates, / old boys of Yeats’s “tragical” (pathetic) generation’ (“Remembering the ‘90s” 16-18). In any age where the significance of poetry is being scrutinised, its
medium of representation faces a certain amount of uncertainty in relation to its presence; as a style that is dependent on a subject that has become obvious, and yet also only determined through its particular associations.

As I have been demonstrating in this chapter, the ‘poetry of the future’ consists of the musical motif, the most significant aspect of it being how neatly it frames the occurrence of the lyric ‘I’ in the different collections. The true origins of “sympathy,” according to the expressionist artist, Kandinsky, is where “an art can only create an artistic feeling which is already clearly felt. This art, which has no power for the future, which is only a child of the age and cannot become a mother of the future, is a barren art. She is transitory and to all intent dies the moment the atmosphere alters which nourished her” (4; emphasis added). The suggestion is that the tradition of modernism fails at the outset, in its very ambition, something that however Mahon addresses in *Life on Earth* where mythological characters like Tiresias illustrate more deeply allusive contexts found within the modernist canon, offering a bridge between the modernist artist and the contemporary or postmodern one:

Released at last, I lived out my two lives between the water and the *vie en rose*:
the bottles ting-a-ling between hedgerows,
a draughty house at the end of a country lane. (Jean Rhys in Kettner’s” 39-42)

Almost lost between ‘two lives,’ the discourse of art has not been more in want of a rationale for the poet. The consolation in *An Autumn Wind* is that the lyric ‘I’ has become the source of its own mythology. The above lines are the beginnings of a more dramatic art that emerges in Mahon’s work, emphasising how his *oeuvre* increasingly aspires towards the representation of artistic originality, whose medium is found in a language after all close to home.
The Dramatist at Home

I discuss how the lyric embodies a form of language and memory that Mahon appropriates to show the importance of an aesthetic of beauty informing the representation of the literary form at stake in music which concerns this chapter: ‘Homer was wrong, he never made it back; or, / if he did, spent many a curious night hour / still questioning that strange, oracular face’ (“Calypso” 98-100). Mahon transforms the poetic form into evidence of a literary landscape belonging to a particular language that has become accessible. Its dramatic language or medium may be accessed through a sense of identification with it, something that may be argued in relation to “Resistance Days” and the figure of ‘a gauche and unregenerate anglophone / tongue-tied as ever in my foreign tongue’ (19-20). An understanding of the lyrical tradition invokes its own image and mythology, which is evident as an increasing trend in Mahon’s work, as shown in his interest in the translation of plays by Greek dramatists. Therefore, ‘my soul-silence too is architecture’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 17), he says. ‘Home’ is a clue to a landscape that his work signifies; yet not in a way that provokes commentary on simply familiar associations. Rather, it is concerned with a particular interpretation of the lyrical theme, which is transformative in reading his recent work.

Mahon’s interpretation of a language that originates from the dramatic encounter of the ‘Greek’ lyric results in what he paints in “White Cloud,” which refers to as ‘a fourth child’ (22) in his poem ‘after Brecht.’ The ‘child,’ no doubt a strange one, is a person whom he refuses to name. Instead, the poem reflects that: ‘The cloud, though, hung there for a moment only / And, as I watched, it broke up in the breeze’ (23-24). The observer of this moment is disillusioned, citing the dramatist’s medium as a reason, albeit not in relation to the sentiment it evokes.
Mahon ventures to make a similar point in the opening poem to *An Autumn Wind*. By alluding to Homer’s heroic lyric, he suggests the importance of having a knowledge of the form. Its knowledge does not, however, ensure the manner of its significance, which Mahon’s poems prove to us: ‘I always knew you’d make it in the end — / and here you are, although without your men’ (“Ithaca” 26-27).

As the third poem of “Autumn Skies” tells us, a poem originally dedicated to Michael Longley on his birthday in 2009, ‘It all began at Inst’ (“A Quiet Cottage” 1). Its name, which is more than the place where he wrote his first poem, points to the memory of the existing poem rather than the original that inspired his career after winning a prize for it (Myers 191). The problem with the interpretative context of Mahon’s art is that ‘home’ is also a critique of the lyrical personality. It represents a series of concealments, rather than simply a revelation of its forms of memory.

According to Johnson in *The Idea of Lyric*, “For the purpose of containing, ordering, clarifying, this situation of discourse, the pronominal form, so far from being mere rhetorical artifice, is a natural, perhaps the natural form” (73). These forms may be self-evident to an audience of poetry but they are also ecstatic in feeling, in that there may be no plainer form of expression of the lyric.

Mahon’s dramatisation of the narrative of ‘home’ involves an ideal setting for the consideration of its theme that is found in a structure disclosed within his work:

‘Homer was right though about the important thing, / the redemptive power of women; for this narrative, / unlike the blinding shields, is womanly stuff’ (“Calypso” 61-63). In this way, he derives a narrative theme of ‘home,’ a self-sufficient symbol discovered paradoxically in *Harbour Lights* as a ‘foreign tongue.’ In *An Autumn Wind*, its theme has developed into part of the anticipation of his poetry:

Out there in a great plain or wood  
a leaf unfolds the rolling news
mutation writes, and the wind sighs
secrets the ancients understood. (“Blueprint” 33-36)

What one seems to find in the poem is, thus, a form of paganism that is less informed by nature ‘out there,’ than being demonstrative of the emotional reality of the poem, whose proposition is of: ‘a different music of the spheres’ (15).

The poem produces, therefore, not even the same understanding of a geographical property which one associates a poet like Louis MacNeice’s with: the Ireland wholly of the imagination. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews says that, for Mahon: “Home is ultimately the whole interconnected world, ‘each thing distinct but in oblique relation’ (HL 63). The mind that has been exiled from nature is ecologically reintegrated” (Writing Home 174). Incidentally, Mahon describes himself as having been brought up as a “United Irishman” (qtd. in Myers 192), a view of the world that was not shared by many Northerners. It is this ‘reintegrat[ion]’ of Ireland and its imaginative sources, as the ‘secrets the ancients understood,’ which shapes Mahon’s quest for form. At the same time, ‘Ireland’ is the myth that he also acquires for his work, which he offers as a solution to the political problem that Northern Ireland poses for the Irish:

Enough, already, with the failed agendas, give the Alonquin back the shiny vein of ore we struck
and watch them re-enchant the world. (“Blueprint” 37-40)

Mahon explores this symbolic stage with the familiarity of his own medium, as shown in An Autumn Wind. However, it is precisely as a writer that these ‘agendas’ ‘fail,’ as he acknowledges in the earlier collection: “‘Writing I don’t know; other things I know’: / what children now in the gardens of Roseau?” (“Jean Rhys in Kettner’s” 24-25)
‘Ireland’ is precisely the discursive situation of the lyric that Mahon addresses through past and present narratives. This is most powerfully depicted through the message of his lyric. Its “pronominal form” finds its invaluable function as its “natural form” through the ‘blind prophetic eyes’ of Tiresias (1.193), a key character in Mahon’s versions of Sophocles’s plays, which he combines into a single one that is simply called: Oedipus. An important part of the plot is that the lead character, whose name is reflected in the title of the play, is unable to cast light on a mystery that lies for his audience hidden in Mahon’s version of the play:

Tiresias, we know nothing escapes your prophecies. Nothing in heaven or earth, no knowledge, lies beyond your scope; you know though you don’t see our present discontents. We’ve heard the Oracle and now seek your guidance and advice. (1.194-98)

It is ironical that those who are familiar with ‘the Oracle’ turn out to be the most ignorant of all, perhaps in deference to the original play by Sophocles. The extended chorus parts are written to bring the truth of a famous investigation to light, and in so doing, bring his play to pass. In other words, by staying close to the original play, Oedipus only serves to emphasise the artistic direction of Mahon’s account or version of it.

For Mahon, Tiresias represents an experiment in the “pronominal form,” and his character is given his own lines in “Circe and Sirens”: ‘…if you survive,’ Tiresias warned, ‘the few / remaining dangers you have yet to face / and the temptations being prepared for you’ ” (51-53). In being only a fragment of the actual lines, it appears as if one is only overhearing them, as characters in the original play – and with whom we have become indirectly acquainted. The real shock here is in discovering Tiresias in a role whose narrative is yet to be played out, by making his readers unwitting participants in its version. The plot continues as befitting his name and reputation, but
we are no closer to solving the mystery of the original dramatist of Oedipus than the writer of “Circe and Sirens.”

Regardless of the possible overlapping contexts of the poem and the play, all Tiresias can be representative of is the voice and character he is cast in, within the poem. In other words, the narrative contained in his name is significant as an existing context of intertextuality, and which could happen with any other name, or indeed, symbol that Mahon chooses to highlight in his work. Thus, although the poem evokes other contexts of meaning besides itself, all that matters is a personality that may be, albeit belatedly, recognised: ‘He might retire, sea music in his ears, / this micro-climate his last resting place, / and spend his old age in sublime disgrace’ (“Circe and Sirens” 58-60). Like the language of “sea music,” the context of Tiresias’s ‘last resting place’ has expanded to include the fictional or topographical ‘blueprint’ for any poem that searches for an autobiographical medium.

The presence of such an autobiographical medium is what Donoghue calls “the condition of executive form, that is, of performance” (SOB 119), which is found ‘at last’ (“Biographia Literaria” 48) for the poet, as a reward from his translation of Sophocles’s plays. The original identity of Tiresias, however, is part of that inheritance, something that works well with the myth that continues to surround the character in relation to Eliot and the modernist canon: “The Waste Land’ achieved the right form to intuit an ‘inclusive consciousness,’ adumbrated though not completed in the figure of Tiresias” (SOB 119). His character represents the literary mode that ensures Oedipus both retains its original dramatic context, and the present one, which include the associations with that name that have become part of Mahon’s own journey which he continues to weave in and out of his poems.
Mahon takes advantage of something apparently lacking in the treatment of literary subject matter. He says that: ‘Gaia demands your love, the patient earth / your airy sneakers tread expects / humility and care’ (“A Quiet Spot” 22-24). Tiresias only belongs to a whole system of mythology which Mahon continually introduces depths to, and expands. ‘Gaia,’ in this instance, is the ‘familiar shrine’ (“Ithaca” 34) of form and beauty that draws us into Mahon’s particular story. It belongs to a perspective and a theme presented in the final stanza of “A Quiet Spot”:

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. (25-30)

There is very little sign of what the lines refer to apart from the way they end with: ‘listen to the leaves.’ Yet, this is precisely the imperative that is necessary for ‘a clearer vision’ of poetry as a literal resource for poets, which ‘Gaia’ represents.

Harold Bloom says that: “a poet’s stance, his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, must be unique to him . . .” (Anxiety of Influence 71). In the ‘advance against / the exigencies of form’ (“Autumn Skies” 3.5-6), what is evident is that the poetic theme is also the personality of the work. It is an important part of the motivation and representation of the lyrical mode, as Mahon shows us how.

The search for a verbal catalyst, as discovered thus far in his work, forges an important link for Mahon’s ‘identity’ as a poet. His fundamental expression of an ideal structure of ‘reality,’ which is closely tied to his vocation, is based on the ability to impose a poetic theme. The dramatic situation of a poet is such that, in “Autumn Skies,” we are told: ‘If a thing happens once / it happens once for ever’ (2.29-30). What this threatens to do, however, is to put Mahon’s work down only to its rhetorical play of words, without explaining the source of his theme: his “River of Stars” that
appears unlimited. As such, music is, in effect, the presence of the “force of form” in Mahon’s *An Autumn Wind*, to use Donoghue’s phrase in *Speaking of Beauty* (107). This is particularly so where the purity of the lyrical subject is no longer as certain, as expressed in the collection.
Reconfiguring the Romantic Image

As I have argued in this chapter, the ‘musical’ theme written for his poems appears to coincide with a ‘language’ whose associations for the writer are not accidental. Precisely because they are obvious, however, they could easily be overlooked. This is what characterises Mahon’s ‘new space’ – the suggestion of a poet’s lyrical fantasy, like ‘Gaia’ does. If only for a moment, ‘new space’ is the realisation of a theme literally embedded in its subject. In this way, the ellipsis in the epigraph to “Harbour Lights” from Rachel Carson’s The Edge of the Sea deliberately emphasises the “pronominal form” that is now decidedly modern: “And I... a mere newcomer whose ancestors had inhabited the earth so briefly that my presence was almost anachronistic” (HL 61). The “pronominal form” has become its own thesis or proposition, an “expressive symbol or image of time” (F&F 115).

Embodied in the lyrical self, the poetic persona has been taken up as the subject of the ‘lyric,’ the manner of which suggests a similarity in terms of an Irish literary tradition that informs both Mahon’s and Yeats’s work, which Chapter Four explores. Edna Longley says that: “Mahon’s protagonists are often at some remove from sensory contact with the phenomenal world” (“Extreme Religion of Art” 292). At the same time, that “world” is indebted to a medium that brings us closer to something or other contained within the individual artist: the lyric, as the poet’s particular way of representing the modern world. The poet’s task, then, is to find a way to represent the language of the symbol belonging to that “world,” through a motif that illustrates similar literary situations. In this way, ‘the weak souls among the asphodels’ (NCP 81) of Mahon’s “Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” brings our attention to a subject that is as precise as the symbol it struggles to bring into the open space of expression. Adopting the character of a ‘keyhole’ (13), an image of its kind evokes an
entire poetic landscape for Mahon’s reader, precisely because of the feeling of distance created in relation to what the poem is determined to represent.

Present as “the one star in their firmament” (14), Mahon’s poem hardly troubles the surface of its representation. However, when we reach Harbour Lights, the presence of these subjects have been reduced to ‘one faint star’ in ‘a shivering dump’ (HL 32). In An Autumn Wind, however, we discover a new grammatical construction: the “pronominal form” is not as a sign of poetic convention, but rather, simply expressive. That grasp for expression always seems to have a hard edge in Mahon’s work, which works in his early poem. However, in “A Quiet Spot,” he seems to have reconciled finally to the primary criticism of poetic ‘life’ as being itself a form of mythology, which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Corcoran says in “‘Persisting for the Unborn’: Derek Mahon’s Elegiac Poetics” that: “Mahon’s staunchly humane poetry depends on the manner in which life and death are suspended together in the curious condition of survival” (93). In other words, poetic mythology is always one step ahead of an ideal, formless present for him, which forms a point of comparison with Yeats, in Chapter Three.

What one invariably ends up discovering in Mahon’s work is the purpose of expression albeit without any apparent risks taken in terms of a chosen theme. Even as a manner of speaking about it, it is something that exists only within its given context: ‘as in the opacity of a developing-bath’ (“The Cloud Ceiling” 30). What is opaque is not Mahon’s subject. However, it requires an audience who appreciates how the barrier in relation to a writer’s most fundamental beliefs has to do with the role of expression in ‘life’ – a mythology that he apparently had no chance to opt into. To meet him on his own terms, one needs to also account for the poet’s experience in the construction of its forms.
As Donoghue suggests, having examined the work of Thomas Browne: “if you have style, you do well to have several styles [. . . ]” (OE 41). The capturing of the sensitive nature of the lyrical theme in Mahon’s work necessitates that it is not firstly descriptive of a poet’s immediate reality – and likewise, his desired future. Yet, what it can and does represent is an artist’s feeling in relation to the visual ‘reality’ of his medium. This is his theme – a permanent ‘space’ that goes beyond a tone or attitude towards cultural facts that the poetic genre appears to attract. If there is true dissent, it is not with the reality that is frequently associated with Northern Irish poets, but one that more broadly defines the boundaries of a modern poet. The fear is that art actually disappears precisely because a particular style one attempts to pin on him. Yet, this is the knowledge that a modern poet must survive.

For the artist, the burden of personality begins and also ends with the completion of a work. In one of his letters to a young poet, Kappus, Rilke says that: “believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it” (43). Art continues to place a limit on reality, with unexpected results. Mahon is acutely aware that the poet has no one to speak on behalf of him, and that alone is the nature of the tragedy of ‘life’ that is represented in his work. The ‘old curse’ and its ‘[t]erminal ironies,’ persist – but only to preserve a mythology of verse, despite and even because of its skeptics. This command over his theme, his formal control, is an inheritance, but also a conscious contribution to the analogy of a poetic tradition. The threads of history continue to be bound to what Mahon calls ‘the tough nuts’ in “Harbour Lights” (103), precisely because what really matters in poetry is not what can actually be studied: “every true poet has a song in his mind” (Keats qtd. in Hollander 27).
Mahon borrows from a poet of ‘beauty and truth’ like Keats a theme that is as mythological as it is inevitable, even if it appears to have originated with the Romantic poet. The following lines written in blank verse from Keats’s *Endymion* illustrate a repressed longing for a proper ‘form’ for his sentiments despite his muse:

```
Fearfully
Must such conviction come upon his head,
Who, thus far, discontent, has dared to tread,
Without one muse’s smile, or kind behest,
The path of love and poesy. But rest,
In chaffing restlessness, is yet more drear
Than to be crush’d, in striving to uprear
Love’s standard on the battlements of song. (II. 34 – 41)
```

Yet, there is something to be gained ‘on the battlements of song,’ in a poem that Yeats refers to more than once in his essays (*E&I* 284, 294). Such a ‘song’ brought Keats close to “a state of refined sensation, desirable largely in and for itself,” as Walter Jackson Bate describes it (141), otherwise impossible, as Yeats puts it, on “the testimony of our ordinary senses (*E&I* 294).

The presence of the dialectic of beauty and form explains the importance of the epic poem in relation to Keats’s other poems. There is in his readers, what Bate calls “an almost physical craving” (141) for the personality behind the poetry. What Keats appears to lack in his epic is a character or personality to reconstruct his theme, but also to achieve his goal: ‘Love’s standard on the battlements of song.’ Style is, thus, like a final destination, whereas for Mahon’s Tiresias, it is just the beginning:

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Dangers he had expected, not another
island, its dune songs and erotic weather
where he might stop indefinitely moreover
and his restorative visit last for years. (“Circe and Sirens” 54-57)
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Where truth is the ultimate goal, Keats’s understanding of beauty suffers from what Ernst Cassirer has deemed: “the illusion in which the human mind has from time immemorial been confined” (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 136).
Style is the very moral that is implied in Bate’s phrase made in relation to Keats’s work: “in and for itself,” even though he makes it sound like one approach to reading poetry out of many others. For this reason, *Endymion* appears to be a more temporal fantasy than “Circe and Sirens.” If there is no other approach to the discovery of literary meaning, however, it is precisely the symbolic content of Mahon’s work that is most likely to be overlooked or even misread. Thus, Peter McDonald observes that:

One facile reaction to Mahon’s poetry, from critics in search of some palpably political ‘engagement,’ is to understand it as somehow beside the point, holding itself aloof in an exquisite (but finally irresponsible) aestheticism that always looks the other way. The judgement of the *Field Day Anthology* that Mahon ‘writes not just of, but for, posterities’ conceals a subtle deprecatory pressure. However, Mahon’s writing does not opt out from the present, or from responsibility, if only because poetry cannot, in any meaningful sense, opt in to such things. (*Mistaken Identities* 96)

It appears that Mahon’s work is how it is, because of how his voice has become integral to the ‘poetry’ that he writes. This, however, leaves him stranded in a position that seems unenviable according to some critics, but which in his poem is suggested to be ‘restorative.’

Beauty is no longer just a principle to be kept, as truth was for Keats, but rather, it is the possibility of having other styles as well. Therefore, Mahon’s aesthetic contained in “Art and Reality” claims that:

Perhaps reality and art,
grown disputatious, even thought
the two of them were poles apart

and not the mates they really are. (38-41)

According to the criticism from the *Field Day Anthology*, Mahon’s poetry is an escape “in to” an ‘aestheticism’ that insinuates the continuity of something in his poetry that, as McDonald points out, cannot otherwise be confirmed within its ‘present’ context. As such, Langer says that: “But the creation of a virtual history is
the principle which goes through all literature: the principle of *poesis*” (*F&F* 253). In other words, the only thing that the *Field Day Anthology* criticises is the intrinsic pattern in Mahon’s work that exposes its sublime forms of art and poetry.

The dogma of Romantic art and the lyrical style consistent to its themes of beauty *and* truth have ‘grown disputatious’ in Mahon’s work. This appears to suggest that his treatment of the lyric may not extend to ‘poetry’ in a broader sense as a genre, something that critics seem to have qualms about but without being something to be afraid of. For Mahon, the point of possessing a personal taste is that it does not intrude or impose. As such, his engagement with lyrical form shows that style does not only belong to those who are looking for it, for ‘everything is water, the world a wave, / whole populations quietly on the move’ (“Harbour Lights” 189-90).

Yet, the agency of form is a contentious subject, particularly because of, as Donoghue highlights in *Speaking of Beauty*, the accusation that: “Formalism” “removes itself too quickly from the issues the poem deals with . . .” All the problems we have with putting “Formalism” in the foreground is the difficulty of its defense; its method argues for “the autonomy of the poem” and “a concern for beauty of form” that are too easily dismissed by a “serious critic” (*SOB* 121-22). Therefore, what the artist must also accomplish is his anonymity, and in a way, this is what Mahon’s sublime style achieves. In response to a poem from Symons’s *Images of Good and Evil* (1899), Donoghue’s observation is that: “Beauty is a force of nature more than a force of culture” (60). What is implied here is that, just like the argument with ‘art and reality,’ the task for the critic is not to limit beauty to its opposition to “culture,” out of a realisation that: “We can live among those appearances. At least we are alert to them as possibilities of experience, and love them for that reason” (*SOB* 110).
As Donoghue says in relation to Wallace Stevens, “[t]he motive of literature . . . is to make the world appear to be our own, if not ourselves.” The reader’s task in reading Mahon as an Irish poet is precisely to discover that ‘world,’ which if it exists, places the focus on a poet who has to navigate these straits alone: “‘Love what you can, die game,’ you said — / and so you did, and so you did. / Your special genius found release’ (“Art and Reality” 81-83). What results is a style that re-interprets ‘reality’ as a series of myths that are as close as life and death. Keats writes in a letter that: “In Endymion I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings…. If Endymion serves me as a Pioneer perhaps I ought to be content…. I am anxious to get Endymion printed that I may forget it and proceed’” (qtd. in Walsh 35). Yet, it is not his epic poem that achieves heroic status, but a younger Keats. Even the poem cannot be an everlasting source of ‘beauty and poesy.’ The limits of its doctrine, which are the limits of “culture” in literary life, are acknowledged by Mahon.

At the same time, there is a literary form which the history of the representation of ‘art and reality’ encompasses, precisely where Endymion, and where the Romantic poet, once failed to be in possession of it. Consequently, ‘Even now there are places where a thought might grow’ (“A Disused Shed” 1). The eventual shape of his individual collections shows a consistency of theme throughout his oeuvre. However, I have argued that it is only through a particular understanding of a ‘theme’ that we may appreciate Mahon’s pursuit of originality, or “its articulation as particular forms” (SOB 121).

The following dedication to James Simmons in “Art and Reality” could well be what Mahon desires for his work. He allows these lines to speak for themselves:

Sworn to our tricky art, you chose
reality over art and pose —
an ‘Honest Ulsterman’ although
a rogue and romantic even so. (29-32)

The secret of Mahon’s style, then, lies in how it preserves, but also conceals his
theme: ‘each thing distinct but in oblique relation’ (“Harbour Lights” 78). Chapter
Four further explains how the intentionality of Mahon’s style translates into a
‘musical’ theme. Its “formal eloquence,” for Yeats however, discovers new readers no
longer confined to the genre of poetry, and in this way, defines a context known as
post-romantic art.

The study of ‘musical’ form or beauty, which the study of nature leads to in
Mahon’s work, consists of forms of style or eloquence and their subsequent ‘reality’
for the artist. His work constantly points to the source of their creativity, whose
ambiguity in relation to his medium is reflected in An Autumn Wind. Rather than from
the basis of specific themes in his work, Mahon’s poems may be studied in the way
they perform a reconciliation of its themes. In the next chapter, I will consider the
purpose that ‘our tricky art’ of beauty and reality plays, where it is measured against
Yeats’s purely symbolic history of ‘Nature.’ In relation to “the creation of a virtual
history . . . the principle of poesis,” as far as Mahon’s vertiginous ‘White page, dark
world’ is concerned, the medium of poetry is infinitely capable of representing an
ideal audience despite the limitations of a verbal medium. Discovered in the myths
that the later Yeats concerns himself with, these limitations are however converted
into a means for him to construct a purely symbolic speech. I will show in Chapter
Three how the differences, where each poet’s vision of poetry is concerned, precisely
demonstrate the function of a more ‘personal’ medium of representation found in the
lyric. In Chapter Four, I will also consider in more detail how the poets’s respective
understanding of this medium extends to the making of a symbolic canon for Irish art.
CHAPTER III: ‘[I]N NATURE’S SPITE’: THE SYMBOLIC ART OF YEATS AND MAHON

Introduction

Chapter One has discussed how Yeats transformed the Romantic vision through his dramatic ‘speech,’ while this chapter considers how drama becomes a place and situation for his later lyrics. Alternatively, by adopting drama as his genre of inspiration, Mahon discovered a dimension of feeling not otherwise possible apart from a more ideal vision of Romantic art. I argue in this chapter the consequences of being a passive observer of a trail of history that ended with the demise of the school of Romanticism, as shown by its patrons. Found in the ‘futile strife / with the blank forces of inhospitable nature’ (Mahon, “At the Gate Theatre” 37-38), such a history entails a context that is not simply aesthetic in Mahon’s work: ‘I claim the now disgraceful privilege / of living part-time in a subversive past: “… fall and are built again”; nor is this the last’ (“Harbour Lights” 100-2). In this way, his poetry is characterised by an absence of an essential history or background for its description. For this reason, I will show that he borrows from the pastoral mode a setting for a narrative or tale that Yeats’s “personal utterance” essentially encompasses. Its medium emphasises an idealisation of poetic history conceived through a personality known to Yeats in his essays on Blake and Shelley – as ‘Nature.’ As such, it is in Yeats, rather than in Mahon, that we see the true antithesis of political commentary in the purely symbolic history involved in the making of a poet’s ‘mask.’

‘Nature’ provokes a critique of the theme of ‘reality’ in Mahon’s work, while it is a foil for the consciousness of ‘Irish’ history or reality in Yeats’s poetics. Mere nostalgia or sentiment is not the course that either poet takes – or rather, not what ‘reality’ allows. According to Jacques Lacan, unlike “the symbolic,” “the real,
whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always in its place; it carries it glued to its heel, ignorant of what might exile it from it” (qtd. in Garber 63). Yet, ‘Nature’ has to be ‘stirred’ into action, like ‘Cuchulain’ (Yeats, “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” 84) who ‘heard / The cars of battle and his own name cried; / And fought with the invulnerable tide’ (85-87). Edward Engelberg says that: “Yeats discovered—to his delight—that sometimes the genuine ballad did not differ greatly from the made poem, that coterie and popular poetry had so intermingled that the folk themselves could scarcely tell them apart” (50). In other words, the “made poem” suggests that Yeats had found a way of accounting for its medium or ‘whole’ in relation to its personal significance for the poet. For Yeats, a symbol where ‘All perform their tragic play’ (“Lapis Lazuli” 9) implies the necessary role of a dramatist who, as I argue, is implied in the study of the ‘lyric’ in his later work. It is a work in which, according to Susan Sontag, “The sense of the inevitability that a great work of art projects is not made up of the inevitability or necessity of its parts, but of the whole” (33; emphasis added). The importance of Yeats’s understanding of the “made poem” lies with written forms that offer a way for oral poetry to continue as part of a mythic consciousness.

For Yeats, then, the culture of the ‘folk’ is representative of the language of symbolism, which is implied in the very experience of Irish art. The tradition of nature poetry, which has been interpreted by Robin Flower in The Irish Tradition as standing for a more “personal poetry,” might be explained, in Yeats and Mahon’s respective applications of poetry, as a mode of written rather than oral history: “For such poetry does not come out of nature, but from the mind of man conditioning natural things by a particular attitude in their presence” (42). For Yeats, the lyric in this form was the opportunity to concern himself with the meaning of his Irish
context. According to Donoghue, “Yeats’s Ireland was one of [the] farewell performances” of an “oral culture” that had influenced him above that of a “visual culture” (Yeats 28). Yeats’s Ireland was never the product of public discourse. However, unlike Yeats’s paradoxical interest in it, as the term “farewell performance” suggests, Mahon’s consideration of translation appears to argue for literature as a tool rather than the source of a cultural memory, as oral poetry was, for Yeats’s Ireland.

As such, this chapter argues that Mahon limits the “contribution” of Yeats by suggesting that myth rather than history is an intrinsic characteristic of the latter’s work. At the same time, Mahon is implying its critical vision for his own purpose of developing an exclusive lyrical context that does not simply lie with Northern Irish poetry. In Mahon’s work, the characterisation of an entire place is, necessarily, the privileged perspective of an ‘exile’ – and the idiosyncratic achievement of a reality exclusive to the lyric. More than that, for Yeats, the lyric stands for a personal journey of belief in relation to the significance of a writer’s vocation. As Brendan Kennelly says in his Introduction to The Penguin Book of Irish Verse, “History happens in time, and like time, it cures and kills, kills and cures. In any survey of Irish poetry, however brief, history keeps breaking in like the uninvited guest whose rude intrusion is redeemed by his stimulating contribution” (29). The symbolism of Irish art continues to need Yeats’s contribution – and the essential antitheticality of ‘Romantic Ireland.’ Therefore, the very engagement of contemporary art with reality proves itself to be like ‘[a] diffident wave [that] breaks on the same shore’ (Mahon, “Harbour Lights” 8). Moreover, it is precisely in this way that the forces of postmodernism are overturned according to Mahon’s perspective in An Autumn Wind.
‘Key to that Impervious Heart’

Mahon speaks of the craft of poetry in relation to the lyric being its own myth:
‘the first whisper of art / withdrawn in its integrity, in its own / obscurity, for not
everything need be known’ (“Harbour Lights” 85-87). It is precisely with art that the
lyric demonstrates how the personality of a work is the source of the dilemma for
poets like Mahon. For Yeats, the history of Romantic poets is discovered in the
presence of a conflict within the very medium that saw the end of its discursive art.
However, this lends to Yeats an opportunity to engage with the very context of the
‘lyric,’ whose “only value is in the whole” (Harper xxxv). I compare in this chapter
how Yeats’s version of the ‘lyric’ differs, and yet enriches Mahon’s version of it.

Peter McDonald says in Serious Poetry that: “in Yeats’s hands, as much as
those of his successors, form and performance are constantly moving, shifting modes
that set the authorial will a fresh challenge each time a new poem has to be written”
(166). Such a medium echoes the symbol of ‘art’ that, for Yeats, may be seen to be
“continually making and unmaking mankind” (E&I 157). In this way, Yeats
distinguishes the symbol from whatever that might be understood about the poem as a
medium of representation. As Chapter Two has shown, for Mahon, a ‘poem’ exists to
the degree that the sign of art is one that resides within the poet himself: “I’d say that
when the poems feel as if they’re working there’s nothing quite so… like the gates
being flung open and… trumpets sounding. A kind of liberation” (Grennan, “The Art
of Poetry”). In short, Mahon refrains from representing the boundaries of ‘art’ in the
way Yeats does. Instead, Mahon suggests that poetry is an example of a desire for an
ultimate ‘reality,’ more than Yeats himself has allowed the medium to be: ‘we want
the key to that impervious heart: / with ultramarine what need have we of art?’
(“Lapis Lazuli” 29-30)
What Donoghue calls “the autonomous work of art” as opposed to “dependent art” ([SOB 71]) is an important distinction to be made, though by no means do either Yeats and Mahon show us that it a self-evident one. The following account is from a late article by Yeats called “I Became an Author” written in 1938, and it implies the difficulty of the representational capacity of art that is easily forgotten under the cloak of symbolism:

I thought a man brought his convictions into everything he did; I had said to the photographer when he was arranging his piece of iron shaped like a horseshoe to keep my head in position: ‘Because you have only white and black paper instead of light and shadow you cannot represent Nature. An artist can, because he employs a kind of symbolism’. To my surprise, instead of showing indignation at my attack upon his trade, he replied: ‘A photograph is mechanical’. ([CW5 299; emphasis added])

Yeats’s photographer did not pretend that his medium was more than it was, and therefore taught the poet that the only thing an artist could pursue was “a kind of symbolism.” In other words, beauty in its important association to ‘Nature’ appears as a realisation of the inevitable inadequacy of one’s artistic medium.

Yet, in this way, Yeats’s legacy belonged to a ‘shadow’ that offered Irish art a sense of hope, though with it, was an accompanying longing:

[Yeats’s] love and hatred, focused on the poet’s language has been a turbulent source of emotional energy in its greatest exponents and may even be a definitive characteristic of Anglo-Irish Literature. . . . But, in Yeats, and many other poets, there is another level of loss and aspiration, which has to do not with cultural antinomies but with the fact that writing is never speech and that poetry nevertheless attempts to cross that uncrossable linguistic gulf. ([Yeats’s Poetry and Poetics 38])

The dilemma that presents itself to an ‘author’ is precisely in relation to an understanding of poetic form that is part of the realisation as well as difficulty of expressing the verbal medium. Yeats had far fewer qualms about exposing the limitation of poetry as a medium for the representation of art, than Mahon who claims
the agency and autonomy of art through an image that he calls: ‘the first whisper of art.’

It was through the medium of translation that Mahon could address the dilemma of poetic language or myth. His translation after Paul Valéry’s “Le Cimetiere marin” (HL 71), we are told, “was begun in July, 1917, and first published in 1920.” Its publication details have been intentionally put on display to emphasise the pursuit of originality, and its details are what a poet and reader alike may grasp as the relationship between the “outer world, our body, and our mind” (Valéry 217). Therefore, the poem also addresses the possible affront brought on by a translation that removes the need for the original poem: ‘Zeno, harsh theorist of conceptual zero, / have you transfixed me with your winged arrow / which quivers, flies, yet doesn’t fly at all?’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 121-23) Mahon’s poem is indeed a new translation, but a ‘new poem’ is limited through the lack of an “articulate symbol,” a term from Langer denoting a fully expressive one (F&F 51), which appears to be Valéry himself, his poetics casting its own ‘shadow’ as his own subject.

Paradoxically, then, a translation is precisely concerned with the survival of the lyrical ‘I’ that is implied to be the end or completion of the work of art – an extension of what Yeats had called “symbolical writing” (E&I 156). Geoffrey Hartman attempts to deal with the problem of the poetic persona, by suggesting that there is an inherent motivation contained in modern poetry apart from its newness, and which continues to be perhaps surprisingly bound to the lyrical tradition:

In a lyric poem it is clearly not the first person form that moves us (the poem need not be in the first person), but rather the ‘I’ toward which that ‘I’ reaches. The very confusion in modern literary theory concerning the fictive ‘I,’ whether it represents the writer as person or as persona, may reflect a dialectic inherent in poetry between the relatively self-conscious self, and that self within the self which resembles Blake’s ‘emanation’ and Shelley’s ‘epipsyche’. (“Romanticism” 62)
The dialectical movement that Hartman speaks of is one that alludes to Yeats’s opposing cones or gyres in *Vision*. However, his argument for “the first person form” could be easily mistaken for “the fictive ‘I,’” just as Yeats had in relation to ‘Nature’ in his encounter with a photographer.

What prevents a poem from appearing in a different form may be answered with a question: ‘And what remains to this dying man / that so well prevents him from dying?’ (Mahon, “Ignorance” 9-10) However, “The Seaside Cemetery” appears to prove what Mahon says in a different light: that ‘the problem is not death but life’ (“At the Gate Theatre” 39). The challenge of translation extended to “*that* uncrossable linguistic gulf” precisely by acknowledging its own limits. As Mahon writes in “Calypso”:

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much-sought Penelope in her new resolute life
has wasted no time acting the stricken widow
and even the face that sank the final skiff
knows more than beauty; beauty is not enough. (67-70)
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Penelope ‘has wasted no time’ getting into her new role, which demonstrates that the very idea of beauty presents a form of resistance. However, even resistance is not final, as that elusive image ‘much-sought’ by artists shows us. Perhaps in contrast, Yeats’s “The Tower” relies on an unnamed persona whom we may infer to be the poet himself in order to convey the very basis of beauty as an aesthetic reality:

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the tragedy began
With Homer that was a blind man,
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.
O may the moon and sunlight seem
One inextricable beam,
For if I triumph I must make men mad. (51-56)
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It is because of the potential of a poetic myth that one anticipates the Greek or Homeric predecessor who has been invoked for the occasion of the poem. Yet, this is not possible without ‘mak[ing] men mad’ – that is, by suggesting that the source of
the mythology is precisely contained in the persona – what ‘Penelope’ could not be for Mahon.

For Mahon, therefore, myths for poetry are present in the realisation that ‘the whole history of creative tension [is] a waste of time’ (Mahon, “At the Gate Theatre” 52). However, the manner in which their very source is a creative problem for a poet like Yeats suggests the importance of what Oren Izenberg calls “the problem of being a person” (147) in relation to a theory of beauty. Beauty is what Yeats described as “‘the conflict’ which creates all life” (AV 72f). As Mahon recognises, beauty is not just something to be aspired towards but is, rather, in perpetual suspension, and as he argues specifically, as an approach to the work of art rather than an existing body of work belonging to an individual poet. While beauty requires an aesthetic distance from the object, whether a “Celtic passion” for life or otherwise, Yeats demonstrates that the completeness of its vision lies with the poet himself: ‘And I myself created Hanrahan’ (“The Tower” 57) is an admission that is so elaborate, it almost suggests that its declaration could be amiss. If his persona succeeds in the poem, it is because the poet has found a way to represent what he had once rejected: the ‘I myself.’

In other words, it is not in lyrical accomplishment alone that Yeats’s later poetics is important for, and this is primarily how he differed from Ezra Pound: “Now at last he explains that it will, when the hundredth canto is finished, display a structure like that of a Bach Fugue” (AV 4). Pound is depicted as finding an explanation for his poetics from within its created “structure.” The specific one referred to – “that of a Bach Fugue” – represents a ‘will’ that reflected his own feelings towards poetic technique. As I have argued in Chapter Two, like Pound, Mahon shows us that the ‘will’ needs to be met or addressed by a proper theme. At the same time, Yeats
questions even the dynamics of that “structure” as representing the foreseeable or readable future – that is, “when the hundredth canto is finished.”

For Yeats, it was through the medium of fiction that the problem of poesis is being solved, something that Langer intimates when she says that: “The transition to prose literature is very easily made once the principle of poetic creation is understood.” Moreover, this transition is made within the limits of a medium of the “lyric” (PNK 213) which the “automatic writing” of Vision really reflects – a symbol that is ultimately unutterable. He does this through the ‘I myself’ by contrasting that with Hanrahan, a fictive persona in Vision, who in this way, becomes an important trope in the poem. Yeats solves the problem precisely through the vehicle of fiction, explaining the lack of obstruction myth now represented for the poet that is the message of The Tower:

It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,  
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend  
Until imagination, ear and eye,  
Can be content with argument and deal  
In abstract things; or be derided by  
A sort of battered kettle at the heel. (“The Tower” 12-17)

I argue that the later Yeats sought from ‘Nature’ – the ‘will’ active through the agency of a mask – a distinct manner of speaking about “automatic writing” in his system in Vision.

Therefore, instead of evoking a voice that varies between different representations of nature which one sees in his early work, ‘Nature’ in a poem like “The Tower” represents a particular consciousness that reflects on the ‘poet himself’ – as the presence of a ‘will’ behind an implied system of symbolism. Yet, the poem does not go further to suggest how such a theme may be present in a different form. Therefore, in this collection, as I have also argued in Chapter One, the poet shows that
he was still ‘content with argument and deal / In abstract things’; that is, in the
bitterness of life.

However, in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, Yeats goes further to
appropriate the *image* of ‘Nature,’ showing that the image that expresses ‘I myself’
has evolved and changed. Its mask and its symbolism have become one. Peter G. W
Van de Kamp says in “Yeats’s Magic and Manipulation” that:

The difference between [Yeats’s] early use of arcana and his later symbolism
lies not in the nature of the symbols used, for his later symbols are just as
inaccessible as his earlier ones are; it lies in the fact that the later Yeats
provides clues within the poetry proper which make the determined
indeterminate and the undetermined determined. (128)

The idea that the artist determines the significance of his work is, in the first place,
not a universal belief; therefore, Yeats shows that only an artist can present it
unhandled. This made the creation of the symbolism of ‘poetry’ necessary, and this is
what Van de Kamp describes; yet, it requires the ‘vacillation’ of beauty and taste, or
the recognition of eloquence in dealing with a discursive reality, as I will consider in
the next part of the chapter.

The advantage of a subject like myth or the “automatic writing” of *Vision* is
that it does not need an additional theme; instead, its presence is implicit in the very
use of symbols for Mahon, as he says in “Auden at St. Mark’s Square”: ‘When will
we hear once more the pure voice of elation / raised in the nightwood of known
symbol and allusion?’ (35-36) This was Mahon’s agenda: to utilise the history of the
lyric form as the context of his own work in “The Hudson Letter.” Therefore, there is
an allegiance implied in the construction of that history; anonymity is not possible. As
the epigraph to “Auden on St. Mark’s Place” goes, ‘If equal affection cannot be, / Let
the more loving one be me’ (*THL* 38). Presumably, these words may be inferred with
Yeats’s lyrical body of work in mind, for it is the magical influence Yeats possessed
which the poem that opens *The Hudson Letter*, “Noon at St. Michael’s,” demonstrates.

The poem is an alternative to compartmentalising Mahon’s life into the literary and the political: ‘While you sit on your sun-porch in Connecticut / re-reading Yeats in a feminist life, / I am there with you’ (54-56). Yet, Yeats’s own life has been seen as an intrusion to readings of his work; Mahon himself has described the folly of Yeats’s work as being motivated by “the will to win,” which he considers to be “a singular character defect” (*SP* 73). How one should go about understanding the person of Yeats is the point that Mahon makes in “Noon at St. Michael’s,” but it could not be complete apart from the predominant ‘will’ that lies behind the action of the ‘mask,’ terms that Mahon manages to separate – something which Yeats attempted to do in *Vision*. That “singular character defect” to do with the artistic will was the dissatisfaction with an aestheticism that needed the embodiment of a vision, for which Mahon looks to Oscar Wilde. Mahon cites him in his epigraph to “Imbolc: JBY”: “There is something vulgar in all success; the greatest men fail, or seem to have failed” (*THL* 55). There is enough wit here to occupy us, and perhaps this is all that is important: that something has been salvaged from an inevitable fate for the fallen ‘will.’

I argue that Mahon had seized Yeats’s ‘Great Wheel’ as an advantageous position for a poet seeking “a progressive, conscious, intellectual life [made] possible by the discovery of writing” (*AV* 205). As such, the decision of what must be done has to be made in relation to what personality meant to the poet, if it was something to occupy him for life, or rather, something sought for the sake of its objectivity. His response to Yeats is, thus, a response to the ‘presentation’ of personality, of which he aims to imitate in the following lines:
You might have been
a saint or a great
courtesan, anachronistic now
in some ways, in some ways more up-to-date
than the most advanced of those we know. (‘Noon’ 49-53)

Yeats has said in Vision, which “Noon at St. Michael’s” appears to point to, that: “Memory is a series of judgments and such judgments imply a reference to
something that is not memory” (AV 192). These “judgements” impose a “Memory”
that emphasises a capacity to demonstrate an artist’s vision, in the way Yeats had said
“The Great Wheel revolved innumerable times before the beast changed into man and
many times before the man learned to till the ground” (AV 205). The ‘will’ was made
not just as “a series of judgements” formed in an individual, but for this reason they
impose on the medium the need for a mythology, of personality:

It is time that I wrote my will;
I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone . . . . . . . (‘The Tower’ 121-126)

Yeats ‘choose[s]’ for his company the ‘living’ personality of verbs that fill up
everything in the path called ‘my will’, the medium that he ‘wrote’: ‘climb,’ ‘leap,’
‘drop,’ ‘dripping.’ The forms belonging to the verbs suggest that they are important
for the illusion whose purpose they have been chosen for. Moreover, these verbs lend
themselves to the immediate situation of the poem, named as the title poem of the
collection, found in the shape of ‘my will.’

The entire situation presented in the above lines has been made concrete by a
time (‘until,’ ‘at dawn’) and place (‘at the side’). However, the ‘tower’ in The
Winding Stair and Other Poems, as seen in Chapter One, suggests an almost
completely different object, as the recognition of an almost completely subjective
‘will’ that imposes itself in “Blood and the Moon.” The symbol of the ‘tower’ in each collection may, thus, be compared in relation to Yeats’s representations of the poetic will, found in a style that he discovers in the earlier collection. However, instead of enforcing an image like that of ‘dripping stone,’ the symbol in The Winding Stair and Other Poems foregrounds a different understanding of the purpose of the image.

In the same essay on Yeats, Mahon says that: “in his curiously practical fashion, Yeats was epistemologically sound. He always ‘saved the phenomenon,’ as scientists say” (SP 72). It was precisely his ability to produce forms of speech that crossed over into writing which makes Yeats’s understanding of personality difficult to anticipate. Mahon, however, attributes a remaining or living legacy to Auden more directly: ‘but your / own permanent revolution is the resilient spirit / of the risen Christ . . .’ (“Noon” 5-7). The preposition ‘on’ in the title of the poem suggests that Auden sits atop a medium that he did not have to make from scratch. Nonetheless, the phrase ‘your / own permanent revolution’ intimates a symbol with less complexity than the many literal ‘revolution[s]’ Yeats’s ‘Great Wheel’ depicts.

Mahon will need the realism of Yeats’s ‘great memory,’ however, which he understands as the purpose of the gyres: “The gyres have come in for a lot of stick over the years, but they’re really a way of asking questions like ‘Is there a shape to history?’ and ‘Where do we go from here?’ – questions not in themselves ridiculous” (SP 72). In this way, the gyres stood for the problem of history, for “the symbolic wheel is timeless and spaceless” (AV 205); this is the point that Mahon makes in the opening poem to The Hudson Letter:

And I have seen, as you have not, such is your modesty, men turn to watch your tangle of golden hair, your graceful carriage and unhurried air as if you belonged to history or ‘her story,’ that mystery. (43-48)
Instead of being a slave of the ‘present,’ or simply involved in the rebellious pursuit of something that does not already exist, what the readers of ‘that mystery’ must not discount is the import of the poem that appears to point to *Vision*. It is the precedence of a form of writing perhaps similar to, as Mahon puts it, ‘Writing you can do in you head’ (13).
The ‘Vacillation’ of Beauty and Taste

While Mahon’s treatment of ‘art’ embraces history as a series of eccentricities, Yeats shows us how his work is shaped by the seamlessness of ‘modern’ history. Yeats’s art pursued the question of taste beyond that of a typical understanding of personality. In place of this, his chosen ambassadors of beauty are found through “men who belong by nature to the nights near to the full are still born, a tragic minority” (Aut 293). The greatest of artists are “still born,” and therefore symbolical of the age they belonged to. As he tells us in Upon a Dying Lady, a sequence from The Wild Swans at Coole: ‘Though play is but half done – / “Come in and leave the play”’ (“The End of Day” 7-8). I compare, in Yeats’s and Mahon’s respective work, how poetry may be found in a wider community to be appreciated, through an aesthetic that this thesis endeavours to demonstrate in relation to ‘Nature’ and the representation of poetic history, as discovered in the poets.

History is found, as Yeats describes in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” as “that union with created things” (E&I 79). Despite declaring that ‘the centre no longer holds,’ by turning the idea of his ‘tragic beauty’ around, Yeats reflects how the artist could be found to be the centre of his own universe: “History is necessity until it takes fire in someone’s head and becomes freedom or virtue” (qtd. in Garab 44-45). That ‘history,’ then, meant that Yeats had created a medium of the work of art that was truly ‘new’ for the modern poet; that is, a medium where poetry could be in possession of ‘a written speech’ as a spokesperson for artistic beauty. In this way, speech was a guard for artistic expression, as he notes in Responsibilities (1914): ‘And many a darling wit’s grown dull / That tosses a bare heel when at school, / Now it has filled an old sock full’ (“Running to Paradise” 18-20).
The poet finds a form of eloquence that articulates its true subject, one that I argue Yeats had acquired through his ‘mask’ or the reflection of what Hegel calls “the animated expression of what is present in the spirit as a specific content” (qtd. in Bucknell 21). To use Donoghue’s paraphrase of Blackmur, “to find or to imagine a sufficient relation to causes not lost” (SOB 176) alone grants beauty its objective, and which is thus worth preserving according to Yeats. Perhaps for this reason, Yeats’s words are chosen over Nietzsche’s, in Mahon’s preface to Theatre (2013):

“Nietzsche, who talks about ‘the principles of eternal justice’ as if there were such things. Yeats is preferable: ‘Gaiety transfiguring all that dread’” (11). As Yeats says in a letter from London in February 1901: “illusionary suspicion, illusionary distrust more irremediable than if they had real cause.” In a way, this was Yeats’s answer to the modern mind. If the poet could impose on his work a “super-conscious” (CL 40) sphere of thought, it alleviates the pressure of representation, while usually his energies are spent in making sure ‘everything,’ or every word, counts in a poem.

Nietzsche’s thought sacrifices the forms of ‘Nature,’ or perhaps what Mahon calls ‘a prelapsarian metaphor’ belonging to the poetic imagination (“Beyond Howth Head” 37). As the description of an ideal personality, Heaney in Crediting Poetry acknowledges Yeats’s reputation as having achieved “[w]hat the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed” (29; emphasis added). By touching both the “sympathetic” and “unsympathetic” in ‘nature,’ art prolongs our attention to the formal transfigurations of beauty. To achieve this effect, Yeats adopts beauty as a “sign” (SOB 61), escaping what Allen Tate calls the “angelic fallacy” (qtd. in Dahlberg 158) succumbed to because of passion. For Heaney, “poetic form” may be “at once a buoyancy and a
holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body” (29). Yet, it is not ‘form’ per se that is beautiful, and for this reason, Yeats is instrumental in Heaney’s closing argument.

Although confessing to be in opposition to Ezra Pound’s poetic method, as “Rapallo” tells us (AV 5), Yeats admits that they shared in what mattered: the desire to outdo the lesser ambition of modern abstractions. As Yeats says in “Poetry and Tradition” that even the “Poetical tragedy” (E&I 259) was losing its audience. From a brief survey of Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, a study of poetics greatly influenced by Kant, one discovers that taste largely involves agreement, is contemporaneous, and often formed or established through the writings of others. For Yeats, this form of irony was an “antinomian gesture” (SOB 123) is found in the presence of other artistic possibilities, while for Mahon, it amounts to the very admission of Romantic art. As Kant ventures in The Critique of Judgment, aesthetic judgement requires the sacrifice of objective taste, inferred through what he calls “the canon of the pure understanding” (630). Yeats was always conscious of such a “canon,” or what Mahon calls the ‘love-play of the ironic conscience’ (“Beyond Howth Head” 39). Therefore, as Denis Donoghue says in Speaking of Beauty, “Beauty, whether we try to define it or not, should maintain its recalcitrance and go its own way” (SOB 11). Otherwise, ‘beauty’ becomes a mere concession to the experience of personality, and even the triumph of time over mortal life without.

There is no room for either an understatement or overstatement in relation to the aims of beauty. Mahon is saved from such a fate through sheer introspection, as well as a determination that ‘a prescriptive innocence’ (“Beyond Howth Head” 38) is no longer possible in art. ‘Nature’ or its forms of judgement have become necessary for exposing what John Ruskin, who is daringly descriptive of the externality of
beauty in *Modern Painters*, warns as the “pathetic fallacy” in art occurring as the result of the imposition of the will (*Genius of Ruskin* 133).

Yet, Mahon also derives pleasure from an absence of “a prescriptive innocence,” suggesting that it is precisely in relation to the different forms of irony that he differs from Yeats. In other words, the way “one turns aside from the prevailing commonplaces of discourse” (*SOB* 123) may well be different for each poet, such that the same data may be concerned yet evoking different responses to it. Yet, the turning away from “prevailing” discourse is precisely where the poets are in agreement. Gadamer says, concerning the aesthetic medium, that: “It arises from an unconscious ability, directly inspired by nature, to create exemplary things of beauty without the conscious application of rules, so that even the artist cannot say exactly how he has accomplished his work” (*Relevance of the Beautiful* 97). Thus, beauty may still have the last word, but only where the individual lyric, as I argue, distinguishes itself from the “prevailing” discourse of “poetic form,” which Heaney describes as “both the ship and the anchor” (*Crediting Poetry* 29). Eloquence is what stands between taste and beauty, the pressure of what Borges calls “the aesthetic phenomenon” (qtd. in *SOB* 71).

That Heaney’s eloquence invokes both sides of “poetic form” suggests a certain level of insecurity involved in its representation, which one finds in Mahon’s “The Lady from the Sea,” a poem that alludes to the modernist tradition but also exposes the problems of its ‘make it new’ agenda:

*She* I am a troubled woman on the land,  
I am a seal upon the open sea,  
but it’s too late to give my heart and hand  
to someone who remains a mystery.  
Siren or not, this is my proper place;  
go to your ship and leave me here in peace. (“The Lady from the Sea” 49-54)
Contrary to the leading persona’s thoughts, if the dialogue from “The Lady from the Sea” had to take place; such a place was also, to use Heaney’s words, “an earnest of our veritable being” (29). It is not in “earnest” of a universal understanding form that “the prevailing commonplaces of discourse” may be avoided, and a ‘proper place’ found for the study of beauty. Accordingly, as Donoghue says, “the autonomous work of art is opposed not only to the conditions which produce dependent art but to the conditions – often the same ones – which have provoked its own autonomy” (SOB 71). The aesthetic experience needs to eschew “the beautiful thing” (10), which Donoghue notes Kant does – for the sake of forms of beauty that serve as objects of aesthetic attention that are the basis of aesthetic discourse. This idea of beauty translated into the ‘thing’ retains its form in Kant’s, rather than Hegel’s hands – because, for Hegel, beauty in being self-conscious of its status as the ‘work of art,’ inevitably, to use Donoghue’s expression, “dissolves… into its subject matter.” This is detrimental rather than political, because beauty is precisely the “form of attention” (71) that readers need in order to have any comprehension of the artist’s work at all.

One may infer that beauty is preserved as a form of judgement through the agency of myth, while the work of art is precisely a semblance of what results from the union of the artist with ‘Nature.’ Donoghue seems to concede this when he says that: “It appears from Kant that a work of art has only one merit over a scene in nature: that it is more directly a symbol of morality” (SOB 72; emphasis added). It is important to consider Yeats’s essay, “The Celtic Element in Literature,” as a serious piece of criticism. In particular, he says that: “The Celtic passion for Nature comes almost more from a sense of her ‘mystery’ than of her ‘beauty,’ and it adds ‘charm and magic’ to Nature, and the Celtic imaginativeness and melancholy are alike ‘a passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the despotism of fact’” (E&I 173).
However, the much-vaunted qualities of the ‘work of art’ do not guarantee “its perfection” or its harmony with that image: “the god it calls among us” (E&I 157). A phrase taken from “The Symbolism of Poetry,” the essay is less a description of the point of view of an artist, than a description of what cannot be achieved through contemplation:

> Between extremities  
> Man runs his course;  
> A brand, or flaming breath,  
> Comes to destroy  
> All those antinomies  
> Of day and night;  
> The body calls it death,  
> The heart remorse.  
> But if these be right  
> What is joy? (“Vacillation” 1-10)

The artist is caught between his intrinsic role and a personality gained through his ‘body of work.’ Any aesthetic point of view or system of taste for an artist, then, should be treated with caution, for from it emerges the ‘body of work’: ‘The body calls it death, / The heart remorse.’ Claude Lévi-Strauss says that: “I don't have the feeling that I write my books, I have the feeling that my books get written through me... I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no ‘I,’ no ‘me’” (qtd. in Wiseman & Groves 173). This is a view of the ‘work of art’ that belongs to a concept of an anthropological image where the artist’s personal history resides. An intrinsic identity that can be shared with his readers, Lévi-Strauss finds his focus re-orientated to reflect a ‘body of work’ where a personality exists in order to be talked about: as “the place where something is going on.”

The difference between the ‘work of art’ and the ‘body of work’ of an artist may be found in the explanation Rilke offers in the first Duino elegy for this state of affairs: “for the Beautiful is nothing but the onset of the Terror we can scarcely
endure, and we are fascinated because it calmly disdains to obliterate us” (qtd. in SOB 75, emphasis added). It is easier to judge a good work of art than to claim to be sufficient to judge a bad work of art. In this way, Mahon achieves his forms of nature – ‘things’ or words that may be aesthetically appraised – by turning them into a mere notion: ‘It might be anywhere, that ivory tower / reached by a country road’ (1-2). Apart from the first line of “A Lighthouse in Maine,” the opening poem to a sequence called Art Notes, the title of the poem appears to have little relevance to readers. The precise relationship of ‘that ivory tower’ in relation to ‘a country road’ is surprisingly known, as the form it is present in for the symbol to be attended to.

Indeed, ‘that ivory tower’ depicts the power of a ‘place’ in relation to a syntax that appears to be important only for the apprehension of the unknown place marker that begins the poem. What this demonstrates is that a ‘poem’ for Mahon has become an anticipation of what Lévi-Strauss calls “the place where something is going on,” where one finds not just the image but “a personage”; as Donoghue says in relation to Ruskin: “rather than of a body of work that stands free of its personal circumstances” (SOB 177). Yet, with great sophistication, he acknowledges that such a reality is unlikely to fill the pages of an artist’s work, and for that purpose, the poem contains a theme found in a title that manifests itself as the very personality of the work.
Limits of the Pastoral

With his first ‘autobiography,’ Yeats was not just any other lyrical poet with an occupation. He also established a point of reference for the lyric he described as his new mode of writing in *Reveries Upon Childhood and Youth*: “I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm” (*Aut* 74). It was rhythm that formed the basis, and defined the quality, of a lyric. Likewise, metaphors that underlie the main action in Mahon’s lyrical work are not merely words that point to other things. Yeats’s comment, however, emphasised the intended nuances of this interaction. The difference between the poets is found in the place or context of their meaning, which, as Daniel Tobin puts it, “without the protective armour of a visionary system,” it is therefore more “nakedly” confronted (295) for Mahon. Yeats reflected the consciousness of one man’s history, as seen in Shelley, is the consciousness of history. For Mahon, it is through the ambiguity that such a history lends that allows him, particularly in his translation work, to entertain the belief that the present does not have to suffer the same limitations belonging to the past.

The pastoral is a mode that represents its own kind of language, and for such a purpose, it was the Victorians, as the recognition of a dying tradition in Romanticism, who represented it. As Owen Schur shows us, the language of the pastoral is effective as a medium that unifies the experience of nature, albeit openly:

Unlike the continuous and apparently unmediated representation of nature in the straightforward nature poem, the *locus amoenus* [lovely place] defines a nature that is discontinuous, fragmented from its surroundings, inherently artificial because it is openly language-constructed. All these qualities prevail in nature poetry in general, certainly in the work of the romantics, but only after the critical reader has worked through the poet’s claims to unmediated representation. (11)

The “straightforward nature poem,” one might say, ‘nakedly’ confronts the lack of a vision. In other words, the “artificial” language of “nature poetry” is not expected to
evoke a feeling that was important to the Romantics. Yet, the very language or idiom used in the ‘nature poem’ is implied to be responsible for the connection between the poet and his poem. For Mahon, such a ‘nature’ is deliberately brought into the consciousness of his work, reflecting a history that is clearly the product of the poet’s own manipulation. In this way, Mahon’s ‘half-mad sadhu’ in “Homage to Goa” could be said to resemble the controversial Yeats of Vision: “The body is a shadow,” / said he, “it tells you in the Upanishads”; / but spirit knows no slapstick or romance’ (30, 31-33).

The pastoral mode is one of the rhetorical devices of Mahon’s work. The experience of ‘nature’ is not essentialised. At the same time, the subject of a pastoral poet that refers to the context of writing meant that, as Ransom says in “Yeats and His Symbols,” “No amount of repetition will substitute for a history in creating a symbol” (312-13). Therefore, what the pastoral meant for Yeats was the experience taken away from “a history in creating a symbol,” a history that was not available to a pastoral poet: ‘Nature’s pure unchanging light’ (“Tom the Lunatic” 6).

The two poets are in common in at least one sense: in a pastoral idiom that left an explanation for its signified wanting. At the same time, Yeats’s “mystique of Irishness,” as Edna Longley has called it (“From Cathleen to Anorexia” 1079), provokes the observation that the possibility of an ‘Irishness’ is of no benefit to anyone else – not even the Irish-speaking Gael. Yet, the implied consciousness of such a belief in Irish poetry is most evident, in later poets like Seamus Deane, through resistance (Longley ctd. in McBride 4).

The pastoral mode described by Schur emphasises how the signified was an attribute of the artistic medium rather than a metaphysical system, despite the contrast he also makes between the ‘real’ and the ‘artificial.’ However, Yeats seems to be
saying one cannot have it both ways, suggesting that instead one needs to rely on the illusion: “Mere ‘spirits,’ my teachers say, are the ‘objective’, a reflection and distortion; reality itself is found by the Daimon in what they call . . . the Ghostly Self. The blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all” (AV 22). Therefore, the above is a cryptic rather than cynical perspective of ‘reality.’ What the above comment on “reality itself” suggests for the post-romantic medium is that ‘Nature’s pure unchanging light’ is only discovered by further retreating into its representation, which the discovery of Yeats’s ‘Daimon’ stood for. Donoghue tells us in “The Vigour of Its Blood” that: “In later years and with different materials Yeats frequently said ‘yes’ to the Spirit; under the guise of Mind, for instance, as in ‘All Souls’ Night’” (377). Yeats’s ‘Nature’ was representing, then, a Hegelian notion of the “Spirit,” that “dissolves… into its subject matter.”

The survival of the signified in poetry will mean, as Mahon describes it, ‘Days of resistance, un peu soviétique, / plain Sartre and Beauvoir dancing cheek to cheek!’ (“Resistance Days” 115-56) Longley has remarked that: “one man’s iconography, commemoration or ritual is another’s coat-trailing” (qtd. in McBride 4). In particular, Harbour Lights presents a peculiar interpretation of Yeats’s symbols; possibly the most memorable is his description of a shape belonging to ‘a continent like a plain of lapis lazuli’ (“Lapis Lazuli” 49). The pastoral, as described by Schur, precisely warrants the resistance of any representation of external reality: ‘thin as an aspirin that vast surface shines.’ In order to make the “openly-language constructed” medium of his poetry exemplary, that ‘vast surface’ comes to substitute for the living relationship of a poet with his medium. The problem of the “nature poem” for Mahon consists in the fact that ‘even dissent has long been marketable’ (“Resistance Days” 79). Therefore, he creates a vision that suggests that his contribution to the tradition of
‘nature poetry’ also furthers its mythology, just as the following lines may be read as a version of an “Irish aisling, or vision poem” (Potts 22):

a writhing Daphne thorn-tree, hands and hair
mute but articulate in the Atlantic air,
chained in the ivy strings that bind her there
while somebody takes shape in the heat haze:
a young woman in track-suit and running shoes. (“Harbour Lights” 67-71)

The “Irish aisling, or vision poem,” as Donna Potts says, is “a form that originated in the Middle ages and became a popular means of addressing Ireland’s political destiny” (22). In Mahon’s case, what is important is the interpretation of that “political destiny,” a form of posterity whose importance continues in relation to the poet’s body of work.

Perhaps what the titles of Yeats’s collections: The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), In the Seven Woods (1904), and The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) share is in their identification of a particular persona which cannot, however, be generalised beyond the individual collection. Yet, the presence of what Mahon refers to as the ‘Yeats-head’ (18) in his version of “Lapis Lazuli” appears to suggest, at least through inference, that the mythology of romantic form has not diminished in influence.

Ellmann has described Yeats’s symbols in relation to Vision as: “the empty cornucopia, the crowded void” (Identity of Yeats xxi). In other words, he is suggesting a genre built on these forms of life alone, the word ‘cornucopia’ having the connotation of nature in abundance. Yet, “the crowded void” is clearly not just the evidence of a dying tradition. Yeats had said: “I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use” (E&I 521) – and the solution seems to come from “Vacillation”: ‘half is half and yet is all the scene’ (14). One may not know the source of what Yeats called “stylistic arrangements of experience” (AV 24), but that is because ‘Nature’ does not simply epitomise the creator, and vice versa. As in the
poem, in his introduction to *Theatre*, Mahon acknowledges the myth of Cúchulainn or a ‘character isolated by a deed’ (13), its important identification.

What occurs as the resistance of the lyrical vision is the poet’s very ‘self’ which Mahon’s construction of lyrical history depicts: ‘a raw strand where Cúchulainn fought the waves’ (“Harbour Lights” 66). In demonstrating its dramatic setting in his treatment of poetic inspiration, the myth of Cúchulainn becomes a tradition that he needs – for the creation of his voice on the page, such that ‘even the tiniest night-rustling pebble / might solve the mystery if it had a voice’ (“Harbour Lights” 187-88). In a way, this is instructional of his interpretation of the pastoral where Mahon condemns the ‘politics’ of Romantic vision. For a glimpse of “the empty cornucopia,” in the final poem in its series, he demonstrates “the crowded void” of “The Hudson Letter” into his own version of Romantic inspiration:

> open now
> to our languor the interior of the rose
> that closes round ambition, and disclose your secret, be it Byzantium or the sphere all centre, no circumference… (“The Small Rain” 71-75)

By ending with an ellipsis, the poem suggests that it has reached the limits of its representation: ‘When does the thaw begin? / We have been too long in the cold. — Take us in; take us in!’ (89-90). The closing action of the poem echoes “Disused Shed in Co. Wexford.” Mahon appears to be suggesting that the centre of Yeats’s mythology, or ‘the interior of the rose,’ may be found in its *genius loci*, a spirit of place that has been psychologically determined for an Irish writer. However, this is only evident where its centre is being resisted: ‘Byzantium or the sphere.’ In this way, one sees the importance of his ‘framing’ poems to the collection – particularly “Noon at St. Michael’s.”
Representing the immigrant experience, *The Hudson Letter*, together with its ‘framing’ poems, actually interrogates the treatment of Yeats’s symbols as implying a system of mysticism. In the same diary that gave birth to “Byzantium,” Yeats writes that:

I think that two conceptions, that of reality as a congeries of beings, that of reality as a single being, *alternate in our emotion and in history*, and must always remain something that human reason, because subject to one or the other, cannot reconcile…. Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease. (*Exp* 305; emphasis added)

What is, thus, “alternate in our emotion and in history” is the belief that the end and objective of ‘reality’ is found in a portrait of a ‘Romantic’ poet. Similarly, in describing the pastoral, Schur does not forget that its setting requires a prescribed context and language. He manipulates ‘nature’ by foregrounding the gothic imagination that anticipates the fictive medium he describes, if not also a renewed order of ‘nature’:

Pastoral takes life in a language of the signifier without the signified. If the signified were to arrive, we would no longer be within the world of play, the acts of the imagination that define the pastoral experience. The signified is reality’s intervention. And pastoral always tried to displace reality with another world. (11)

Perhaps language has “always” had such a supernatural function. As Mahon says in “Global Village” concerning his general approach to poetry in “The Hudson Letter”: ‘so the real thing tells us what we already know: / American Gothic’ (21-22). The pastoral is not a new genre that Schur is framing, nor does Mahon’s collection succeed in suggesting that Yeats’s symbols offer new ways of establishing the future of poetry.

Yeats’s “Unity of Being” continues to be influential in Irish art – but important in a different world as a direct consequence of Mahon’s poetics: ‘who doesn’t know, and who would not decline / the empty skull with its eternal grin?"
(“The Seaside Cemetery”107-8) Using the language associated with the description of *Vision*, who could miss “the empty cornucopia” as a foundation of contemporary poetry, but who does not know intimately “the crowded void” and its symbols. The connotation of the purely symbolic inheritance of an Irish poet has been made inevitable in Mahon’s work: ‘those clear-cut artifacts of the continuum, / time and knowledge, take the shape of a dream’ (11-12).

It is precisely the absence of a living connection with the Romantic tradition that spurs the interest in the ‘nature poem’ in Mahon’s work. As MacDonald comments in his review of *Harbour Lights*:

> One suspects that Mahon’s admiration for the hard and the sharp remains as strong as ever; but other kinds of poetry, like other kinds of feeling, are nowadays more liable to intrude. These feelings include what Kermode calls a “longer poem,” as opposed to the long poem, a “recurring problem” in the “Symbolist aesthetic.”

By drawing our attention to the lyrical ‘I’ in its closing poem, “The Seaside Cemetery,” its form or shape attracts a personality that also escapes the scrutiny and historical course of a modern epic poem, or “another’s coat-trailing.” He does not attempt to reproduce the myths, only to send them on their way wherever they are encountered, in his work. MacDonald says that:

> Sometimes, it is true, Mahon can find himself stating the obvious and defending the good in a register that resembles Louis MacNeice at his worthiest but least exciting; but the poetry contains, even so, enough low-key, humanistic (and humane) wisdom to keep the more strident ghost of Yeats safely at bay.

Yeats had continually sought to define his antithetical mask against his own measure. It was the result of having become quite convinced in *Vision* that modern poetry needed a symbolism that was complete. Yet, to what extent does the statement: “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry” (*AV* 8) belong to an actual theory of
poetry? Yet, it is important to consider the assumption belonging to such a statement, for the question implies that such a symbolic centre exists, in the first place.

As shown in *The Hudson Letter*, Yeats’s symbol of Byzantium demonstrates that art continues to be bereft of a reality that is not just “for the sake of nature” (*E&I* 163). At the same time, Yeats’s work avoids the limitations of a reactionary stance to nature belonging to the Victorian pastoral, discovering a way to avoid the ideological portrait of the Romantic hero or personality. In anticipation of that personality, however, Mahon arguably achieves in his sequence of poems an important aesthetic, a version of the pastoral by importing an understanding of ‘form,’ which Barthes has described, as that which “is between the thing and its name [:] form is what delays the name” (qtd. in Leighton 81). Yet, ideally for both Yeats and Mahon, the poet is neither a passive nor reactionary witness to history, perhaps an important aspect of their art that unites them.
Dialogue of Nature and History

As Banville says in *The New York Review of Books*, Mahon’s work may be summarised as the representation of: “absence, the hollow heavy ache of all that is not there: happiness, love, family, the cherished place, *Heimat*, whatever.” Mahon’s work proves a particular approach to literary representation that I will consider in relation to Yeats. For Mahon, a poem is a desired form of representation, an end in itself. However, Yeats presents a poem ideally as a structure that appropriates representation as a sign of its limits. The aesthetic rather than political subject is apparent as characteristic of a dialogue in its truest sense, as argued by Gadamer when he says that: “To reach an understanding with one’s partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one’s own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, *in which we do not remain what we were*” (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 341; emphasis added). For Mahon, like that of the dialogue, the very characteristics of its definition have been decided by an intrinsic idea of a *poem*. Yeats, however, transforms its very subject. In different ways, then, for Yeats and Mahon, the poet makes his mask: the adoption of *form*, the expectation of a structure of feeling that is, to different extents, of the writer’s own making.

Explaining the object of the “prose poem,” Arne Melberg says, in relation to the German poet Hölderlin’s version of it, that “[He] makes the lapse of time unite with the event in time; such is ‘the true’ of his *poem of memory*” (89; emphasis added). Such a ‘poem’ in particular suggests a non-discursive context for reading the entire work of a poet like Yeats or Mahon: ‘Because you are forgotten, half out of life, / And never wrote a book, your thought is clear’ (Yeats, “The Phases of the Moon” 96-97). Hartman says, in *Scars of the Spirit*, that Hegel’s ‘philosophical’ interpretation of history: “The wounds made by the spirit leave no scars,” is
insufficient as the practical basis of any artistic medium, if only because “here the end of history and closure of the dialectic” (42). According to Hartman, such an “end” threatens the textual spirit: the semantic force of ‘Nature.’ Neither Yeats nor Mahon could reminisce or dwell on artistic perfection, but for Mahon, the discourse of beauty appears to be already perfected in the lyric, as ‘a future from the past’ (“A Quiet Spot” 28). Poetry is, thus, a structure of time and memory that his body of work ideally represents, while for Yeats, any assertion of poetic achievement needs to take account the very medium of its presentation. Yeats has noted in “Anima Hominis” that: “a realist is a historian and obscures the cleavage by the record of his eyes” (CW5 6). In other words, he may not be free from slavish imitation – but a ‘reality’ is present and shaped or manipulated by the very circumstances of his vision, which is what a poem like “Easter, 1916” shows.

In response to the gap or ‘cleavage’ belonging to history, or the past, for Mahon at least, the poet’s personal body of work is able to initiate the rejection of Hegel’s Romantic or historical dialectic, as well as the memory of a “totalising perspective” which does not disappear with time: “The scar, the traumatic or ecstatic memory trace, is never entirely erased and so becomes, whether we like it or not, the foundation of our sense of reality” (Hartman 43). Mahon goes as far as to show us its events – the promise of his New Collected Poems, whose forms of memory are the inspiration of The Yellow Book: ‘each yellowing page / known only to astrologer and mage’ (“Remembering the ‘90s” 60-61). In other words, we see in Mahon’s work the poetic as an inextricable quality, while for Yeats it remains interdependent on history in the making, for which the poet is not without his own sources for argument.

One sees Mahon caught up in the defense of poetic art while Yeats is intent on the description of what might still be called ‘poetic’ in the modern world. Mahon’s
position is vulnerable to external arguments which he deals with, in “The Hudson Letter” in particular, as a ‘spiritual’ risk that he needs to take as an artist:

‘To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail,’ says Beckett in the Dialogues: ‘that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping.’ The idea of failure, much underrated, thrives between freedom and necessity, between gravity and grace, in an ‘endless quarrel between earth and sky.’ (SP 103-4)

In the fear of the “desertion” of art, a natural sentiment is exposed, however, the above implies the rescue of beauty, at least in prose. This occurs through the dialectical interplay of two mediums – the poet’s symbols, and his ideas expressed in prose. What makes this interaction, which is interaction with ‘reality,’ articulate for the artist, as Adorno argues in his Lectures on Negative Dialectics, is where “thought itself – and thought is tied to subjectivity – is negativity, and to that extent negativity, and especially dialectical thinking, is negative dialectics from the outset” (11). It is the theory of reality that fails, but which is preserved in art through the poet’s medium of representation.

At the same time, ‘crude’ reality happens where taste is reduced to “art and craft,” in the presence of nature, rather than encountered solely for its artistic feeling. It is, necessarily so, where the lyric is concerned for Mahon, that the “prose of history” (Melberg 89) fails. For this reason, any dialogue of symbolic meaning begins and ends on ‘the last rock of an abandoned civilisation.’ In particular, it is the difficulty of presence that Yeats’s theory of the mask poses for Mahon’s work, which is summarised by a trope which Mahon significantly uses in “The Hudson Letter” that implies the metaphysics of Yeats’s mask: “Nature, not having included me in her plan, / has treated me like an uninvited guest”— Turgenev, Diary of a Superfluous Man” (1-3). Incidentally, the above are the opening lines from a poem that are given a title for the first time: “London Time” (NCP 175), presented in New Collected Poems
as part of a collection, “New York Time” (NCP 161), originally named “The Hudson Letter.”

Yet, where ‘Nature’ is concerned, Mahon could be accused of propagating ‘reality’ in his chosen narrative, rather than the realism of Yeats’s mask whose language manages to “manipulate external nature,” according to Ellmann (Identity of Yeats 57). Rather than represent poetic events as a realist, Mahon resorts to adopting the prose of Yeats’s ‘terrible beauty’ without its realisation in his own work, suggesting why Mahon ends “A Quiet Cottage,” from a collection published in the same year as his New Collected Poems, with the conviction that: ‘Now we can die in peace’ (“A Quiet Cottage” 36). Indeed, New Collected Poems could be more profound as the source of these lines rather than because of the individual poems that make up the collection. The immediacy of the line only proves how his poem makes its aesthetic point – much too quickly.

Since New Collected Poems brings with it its many unannounced changes, the very limits of the poet’s own time and space have been exposed; nonetheless, what Mahon achieves is a new subjectivity, which An Autumn Wind demonstrates. There is, as Mahon’s “At the Butler Arms” puts it:

No going back,

is there, to that wild hush of dedication, to the solitude, the intense belief, the last rock of an abandoned civilisation whose dim lights glimmered in a distant age to illuminate at the edge a future life. (42-48)

Aesthetic beauty is an indication of the future of artistic discourse, yet only present within the historical limitations of “Easter, 1916” for Yeats. Beauty is no longer eternal for the artist, something that Mahon however harbours, even conceals, in his work.
Therefore, as in Yeats’s prose poem, “The Phases of the Moon,” what is precisely threatened is the ‘thought’ or motivation behind beauty – which alone is the most lyrical subject of all. While Mahon was forced to recognise the “absence, the hollow heavy ache of all that is not there,” “the essences of things” were preserved in Yeats’s art – but not without a system of revelation. The ‘Great Wheel,’ Yeats’s “principle symbol” in Vision, represented an “individual life” available only through the right personality: “a being which only exists with extreme effort, when his muscles are as it were all taut and all his energies active. But this is antithetical man” (AV 84). In this way, beauty, like the will to fail, seems to have its own mind. Yet, the ultimate result of Yeats’s “argument with ourselves” is that the significance of ‘Nature’ is not simply a consequence of external nature or history. However, it is precisely this point that has provoked a reaction to Vision. According to Harold Bloom, the problem with “the loaded term antithetical” is its “proud force” (Yeats 226). Bloom says that we may choose to be illuminated by Yeats’s Vision, but it almost feels as if the risk is in being led into a trap – to acquire “antithetical man” as it is being presented to us, but thus leaving its readers more empty-handed than we had begun.

Therefore, the metaphors of Vision require reflection especially when they do not seem to be demonstrable in life: “Even when A Vision’s categories prove barren, they have a way of illuminating some odd corner of another’s poetry. More germane to a reader’s uneasiness may be a sense that the book is nothing if it is not wisdom literature, yet it is sometimes very unwise” (Yeats 210). Yet, Vision only performs such an action by demanding the reader’s attention, upon which the symbolic structure of Yeats’s later poetry relies. Otherwise, the lyric, which Bloom implicitly
assumes to abide in some ‘eternal instant,’ loses its context, and its ability to be critiqued objectively.

On the other side of the coin, Mahon’s *Life on Earth* and *An Autumn Wind* each opens with a poem which, quite literally, leaves no room for another context apart from ‘this barren place’ (“Ariadne on Naxos” 18). I have been considering thus far that, even when an aesthetic vision fails to extend the historical influence of an artist, the emphasis that myth places on symbols from the poetic memory may result in a pattern of history that is useful to artists, which one sees in Yeats’s ‘Great Wheel.’ Perhaps offering an explanatory context for reading Mahon’s response to Yeats’s symbolism, in critiquing Henri Bergson’s theory of time, Langer says that: “But it is not the intervention of symbolism as such that balks our understanding of ‘lived’ time; it is the unsuitable and consequently barren structure of the literal symbol” (*F&F* 114). The difference is that the realism of Yeats’s later work exemplifies forms of memory which had much youthful enthusiasm attached to them in his early work.

However, “The Phases of the Moon,” did not have to be treated to a different phase in Yeats’s oeuvre. Published in *The Wild Swans at Coole* in the same year as *Vision*, it does not just contain the key to *Vision*, but also uniquely anticipates reactions to the book. The occasion of “The Phases of the Moon” thus called for a reintroduction to the role of myth in Yeats’s work. Its title, in referring to both the poem and the system of symbolism it is named after in *Vision*, “The Phases of the Moon” suggests that his ‘vision’ comes together in a symbolic accomplishment whose reflection is that the poet’s personal beliefs have become secondary in his later work. Mahon, however, shows that as his poetry gains in vision, the more his belief system
comes into play. However, the only possibility, according to Donoghue, in reading Yeats is that:

*A Vision* is not doctrine or dogma but, in default of those, a testament: it is authoritative only in its origin, and is content thereafter to be merely what it is. It does not ask to be acted upon or even to be believed. It is a work of literature, in that respect like *The Golden Bough*, Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy*, Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. (IE 110)

The above texts share a common tendency, for their very existence exceeds the study which they undoubtedly provoke. Their respective subjects are less essential than the one that turns these books into “literature.” What they share is sheer literary merit, and which may be lost if the works are not read in isolation of their commentary.

The final line in the refrain of “The Phases of the Moon” is controversial, in saying that nothing else exists but the myth: ‘The light in the tower window was put out’ (139). The implication of such a statement is that there is no way to access the symbolism of the ‘tower,’ but its significance also becomes immediately clear to the reader, as a purely lyrical reality. Similar to the cause of Bloom’s “uneasiness” about *Vision*, the line illustrates the frame or structure of reading discovered in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, as discussed in Chapter One.

With a new openness to the work of symbols, just like in the opening line of his “Coole Park, 1929,” one is brought into contact with its very reality: ‘I meditate upon a swallow’s flight’ (1), Yeats’s lyric proves the possibility of the escape from nature. Later in the poem, ‘eyes bent upon the ground’ (29) shows us that a transformation of perception must have occurred, explaining the freedom of construction discovered in the opening line in an otherwise nonrepresentational poem. However, the problem that the line poses is whether such a vision is acceptable by certain known norms; conventions of feeling granted by the work of a living artist. This is something that is taken forgranted in relation to Mahon’s ‘barren place,’ which
should deservedly be studied in relation to what is central in his work as a whole – and whose risk of association is evident in a publication like *New Collected Poems*.

Yeats’s ‘a swallow’s flight’ draws back from making any claim on the reader’s sympathy, the poem instead emphasising the breaking through of a transformed ‘Nature.’ A part of the effect of the opening line of “Coole Park” is that its rejection of reality is almost flawless, but which thus paradoxically recalls the sublime nature of Ruskin’s forms; an artist that I referred to early in this chapter, who says that: “Forms are not beautiful *because* they are copied from Nature; only it is out of the power of man to conceive beauty *without her aid*” (qtd. in *SOB* 154). In this way, “Coole Park” forms a comparison with Mahon’s interpretation of a ‘Nature’ as a form of history that excludes his protagonist, as seen in “The Hudson Letter.” One recognises that to ‘meditate upon’ has a far bolder implication for Yeats than for Mahon. Yeats refrained from overdetermining the “beautiful” – and indeed, its ability to be conceived “without her aid.” In Mahon’s still youthful enthusiasm, the gravity of the subject has been given less attention than in Yeats. However, thus, in contradiction to his statement in “The Hudson Letter,” this is precisely a sign that the connections to ‘Nature’ continues in Mahon’s work, albeit “without her aid,” or without needing much depth to its study of the subject – of history.
On ‘Byzantium’

Mahon’s understanding of art involves the conscious engagement with the mythical as well as formal aspects of Yeats’s later symbols or phantasmagoria. Such a reading of Yeats suggests that his later poetics was always in the making, which although true, does not do justice to the differences between his early and later work, as described by critics like Eliot. The difference between Yeats’s and Mahon’s respective definitions of the ‘beautiful,’ as the former section closed with, may be explained through the distinctions that Yeats had made within his art. It is a finer one between two selves, one that could only be made through his ‘mask,’ as a vision of his ‘anti-self.’ Yeats shows that poetry as a particular form as opposed to genre is an acquired body of work, more than what is being offered by the contemporary canon. What appears absent in Mahon’s work is the ability to live in the present, to live unselfconsciously within poetry as a medium, as well as theme: “[Poetry] is the other thing that is the other thing” (Wroe).

Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ represents a mode of history that remains elusive in Mahon’s work – and it is precisely this fact that is represented in Harbour Lights. As if alluding to an epic scene from a Russian novel, one reads in Mahon’s “During the War,” that: “Andrei / on his back, wounded, during his own war: / ‘I never really saw the clouds before…’” (“During the War” 30-32). The reflection is not achieved by a character from a Russian novel, however, but through a scene that has been recreated for a personality already known to readers. In contrast, Mahon’s treatment of Byzantium in “Christmas in Kinsale” is simply indicative of its unnatural setting. Yet, Mahon is one of the few poets who consciously adopt an approach to Byzantium as the inspiration for his overall artistic vision. In a same way, Mahon’s so-called collection of ‘my Christmas rubbish’ in his poem is, perhaps strangely, the reputation
he cultivates in his literary career: ‘the magic of some primitive place’ (“Resistance Days” 134) originates there. Mahon takes the lineage of Yeats’s ‘symbol’ and turns it into ‘thought’ (Aut 259). In other words, Byzantium is Mahon’s key to the wheel that begins to turn on the gyres of Vision.

The context that Mahon’s poem provides is so different from the original one, yet it is for this reason able to suggest a new version of it, and thus still indebted to the original intention of Yeats’s Byzantium poems. Yeats’s Byzantium poems, as Richard Finneran says in his study of The Byzantium Poems, are important in depicting a “conflict” between Art and Nature that “becomes fundamental in our understanding of Yeats’s total achievement” (9). That “conflict,” however, is inherent in Mahon’s awareness of a more violent or antagonistic present than Yeats was, such that it becomes necessary to conceal its own context or memory: ‘A cock crows good-morning from an oil-drum / like a peacock on a rain-barrel in Byzantium.’

Though acknowledging the necessity of defamiliarising Byzantium from the place of its known associations, “Christmas in Kinsale” is quite literally unmoving in its depiction of the symbol. Rather than connoting a transformation of “Art” or “Nature, as found in Yeats, Mahon’s poem perhaps unwittingly transcends the original Yeats’s Byzantium poems, by suggesting the discovery of its myth. However, far from the poem becoming, as Yeats puts it: the “work of a single mind, [turning] our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols” (Aut 254), Mahon’s Byzantium becomes the very antithesis of such a symbolism that connoted for Yeats, as described in “Coole Park”: ‘Great works constructed there in nature’s spite / For scholars and for poets after us’ (5-6). Therefore, instead of highlighting the fulfilment of such an artistic goal, Mahon says in “The Seaside Cemetery” that: ‘The future, here / already scarcely moved’ (67). I argue that the self-referential nature of the poem
limits symbols to the status of myth, though in this way making it accessible to the reader in “The Hudson Letter”: ‘Does history, exhausted, come full cycle? / It ended here at a previous fin de siècle / though leaving vestiges of a distant past’ (“Christmas in Kinsale” 31-33).

Reading Yeats as writing, to use what Schiller calls, “sentimental” poetry, allows Mahon to bring up myths from the past – perhaps as a numinous place that may still be read, though only as a commentary on Yeats’s use of mythology in his poems. However, in being a place “in which the poet seeks nature” (Schiller ctd. in Frawley 74), the book that a symbolist poet continues to seek after as ‘each yellowing page,’ does not exist:

known only to astrologer and mage
where blind librarians study as on a keyboard
gnomic encryptions, secrets of the word,
a lost knowledge’ and all the rest is literature. (“Remembering the ‘90s” 61-64)

Mahon substitutes what Yeats had willed “not [to] surrender myself to,” which has once been taught in schools as “literature” (Aut 461), with something that argues for a new way of learning it: ‘literature,’ as an extension of a single personality, is most expressive where it signifies a purely representative space – which the letter ‘t’ evokes.

The ‘secrets of the word’ belongs to the manner in which the symbol for Yeats is a method for appraising great works of art, past and present. Connecting the writer back to the origin of that myth, Yeats’s symbols in Vision “imply space” (AV 192); in Mahon’s case, it transforms space into a symbol that is displaced into its new understanding, in the context of “Christmas at Kinsale.” That “Byzantium” or cultural ‘centre’ in Irish art is arguably what Mahon’s understanding of ‘literature’ seeks to represent. Yet, Yeats’s “Byzantium” is also an affirmation of the earlier poem,
“Sailing to Byzantium” – an idea or ideal of space that has been established with the help of the second poem.

Read together with “Sailing to Byzantium,” only “Byzantium” – the poem and not just the symbol – is symbolic of a space that maintains a timeless present. In this way, Jeffares also observes the importance of space in the Irish imagination, suggesting that it stands for a lyrical method belonging particularly to Irish literature:

This is what the Irish writer realises Irish space can do for him or his characters: it can take them out of time, out of the past – a thing particularly to be hoped for – into a blessed sense of timelessness, the Traherne-like vision, the present that perhaps only children really know. And even they need space for it, for if one has space enough, then one has time enough. (“Place, Space and Personality” 37)

The very import of ‘Byzantium,’ at least for Mahon, belongs to a vision that relies on its cultural value. The use of Byzantium in “Christmas in Kinsale” is precisely a response to its historical potential in Yeats’s poems, something that, however, does not extend to the author in question. In his essay on Patrick MacDonogh, Mahon distances himself from what he felt was the “perhaps rather forced emotional triumphalism of ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ and ‘Among School Children’” (SP 102). Sharing a similar sentiment, Longley has observed that: “In its constructive aspect ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ seems a version of Virgil’s ‘messianic’ Golden Age Eclogue IV” (Poetry and Posterity 93). A poem that apparently arises from the personal experience or situation of the poet fails to make its impact, partly because of its unacknowledged myth. The myth is either too strong or too weak – a situation similar to that described of the image by Yeats.

Therefore, even if what Mahon offers is an unforgiving critique of Yeats’s poems, in a very public sort of way, Yeats has become the meaning of his poem: ‘what disturbs our blood / Is but its longing for the tomb’ (“The Wheel” 7-8). Like the creation of Hanrahan from “A Tower,” the image of ‘Nature’ discussed throughout

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this chapter offers a practical dimension of lyrical feeling that Yeats needs to be seen as an important innovator of. Yet, it is precisely the antitheticality of the symbol that conceals Yeats’s art such that it remains out of reach for Mahon, particularly in relation to the work of an individual artist, as seen in “Synge Dying”:

Not real to myself, a sick man fighting for life in the fey breezes and raw winds, I was in two minds about my right to be there writing up the rough holy ground, the roads, the céili and the hiring fair. (“Synge Dying” 8-13)

It is far from evident that the poem is an acknowledgement of what makes the poet-dramatist, who had been a close collaborator in the theatre together with Yeats, important to literary history. Yet, the poem is able to point to a symbolic vision that involves the person of Synge, including the implication that Mahon had found him a proper resting place: ‘But there in words I found / the living world I couldn’t share’ (14-15). Part of the symbolism of these ‘words’ involves the reader’s estrangement from its mythology, a perspective necessary to the controversial picture attained from the “dying” perspective of Synge’s persona: the words, lines, and spaces, as presented in the poem.

However, what is missing in “Synge Dying” is the struggle or conflict of reality brought about by the identification of ‘the living world I couldn’t share.’ The ‘living world’ of Synge’s memory, as represented in Mahon’s poem, suggests a precise pattern of imagery that could be applied even to an unnamed artist, and therefore deprived of what Yeats had called ‘The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor’ (“The Magi” 8). The line is an example of the struggle of a poet to remove himself from an imitative context, something that thus takes into account an original myth. What was important for Yeats was the “ceasing from self-expression” (AV 84), something that Mahon appears to be in agreement with but not apart from
the myth of “self-expression,” explaining the importance of “Synge Dying” in *An Autumn Wind*.

From *Responsibilities* onwards, as Sidnell tells us, one begins to see “the creator of the beauty that never was” (56), something which I have already noted in Chapter One. Instead, Yeats’s antithetical mask has become “the historical norm, or an image of mankind” (*AV* 84). For Yeats, particularly in relation to Phase Fifteen, the phase of beauty, “direct human expression” (*AV* 292) is finally only possible in relation to the work of the “great memory” – the ‘Nature’ described in his essay “Magic.” The mythology of speech is thus preserved – particularly where the poet himself is subordinate to it: “The Mask as it were wills itself as beauty, but because, as Plotinus says, things that are of one kind are unconscious, it is an ideal or supernatural incarnation” (82). However, Mahon assumes that beneath the life of symbols is a conscious reality: ‘I was in two minds,’ we are told, in the poem.

Essential to an understanding of Mahon’s poetic medium is the incorporation of symbols as the evidence of lyrical thought: ‘Magic survives only where blind profit, / so quick on the uptake, takes no notice of it’ (“Harbour Lights” 88-89). For Yeats, beauty was less an initiative than something that he held in awe, and even inimical to any action at all: “When I came to summarise on paper or in speech what the [Vision] scripts contained no other theme made me so timid” (*AV* 261). Magic is not an escape or avoidance of thought. Rather, it intimates dissatisfaction with mere perception; what Kermode calls, in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, “carnal readings” – readings that both escape their “simple primary sense” (9) as well as expose them to the public eye. This is the kind of reading that may be deemed to be necessary, in relation to the future of literary art. Pater has said in the preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* that: “Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human
experience, is relative” (vii). Yeats’s ‘terrible beauty’ goes one step further in demonstrating how his later work is a direct influence on the development of his poetics, as the interaction of “some reality, some beauty” (E&J 163), as opposed to Mahon’s understanding of beauty as a timeless formal creation.

Comparing Yeats and Mahon suggests to readers that there are a multitude of possibilities in the interpretation of poetic form. Each poet ‘merely’ represents one kind of symbolic universe – but where the ability to exclude other versions is also implicit in their manifestations in the respective work. An essay like “The Symbolism of Poetry” highlights the limitation of what Langer calls “a substitute sign” for the study of beauty where an object of beauty continues to be inexpressible. Yet, the need to speak of “symbols in general” is unavoidable in any discourse on poetics (PNK 60), and which is key to any interpretation of Yeats’s imagination, united in his later work in the most dramatic manner possible: ‘The first thin crescent is wheeled around once more’ (“The Phases of the Moon” 117). The present tense underlines a new precedence, a new capacity for myths in his work, which is the moral of the frequently anthologised “Easter, 1916”:

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (13-16).

In this way, the lyric continues to be a source of beauty. As Angela Leighton says, “Form, in the sense of body or matter, offers a world of effortlessly exchangeable identities. As the mere dress of perception, it answers to any subjective need or wish” (148). The thematic play of form and symbolism in Mahon’s work point to the closeness of history and myth in Irish art. For Yeats, however, the presence of forms of aesthetic beauty do not happen apart from the primary sense of ‘words’ as speech,
such that the verbal medium remains one without precedent in the ‘practical arts’ for Yeats.
A Literary Revival?

I have argued the function of the poet’s medium in relation to the conflict with history that is present in the completed work of an artist. The presence of such a dialectic is emphasised by, rather than resolved through, the interaction between style and personality in relation to poetic art, as seen in Yeats and Mahon respectively. As I.A. Richards puts it, “it is never what a poem says that matters, but what it is” (Poetries and Sciences 33). Substantiating his statement, he says that:

To take the most primitive sense first, we shall agree that when nothing whatever happens in our minds beyond the mere perception of the sound or shape of words as words, we do not understand them. Comparatively, any thoughts or feelings or impulses stirred into activity by the words, and seemingly directed towards something which the words represent, are a beginning of understanding. (306)

Without an additional context for these ‘words,’ the poet is forced to lean on one’s “mere perception” of them, and recognise the absence of a particular semantic force belonging to its poetic utterance. Neither Yeats nor Mahon ventures to this extremity, belonging to “the most primitive sense.” There is always something to be “stirred into activity,” whether from the poet’s own body of work, or elsewhere. In other words, there is a trope in their work that emphasises the discovery of the poet’s medium.

The substance of the poetic medium, or ‘Nature,’ Yeats’s own peculiar construction has the capacity to reflect the transparency of words “as words,” words informed by a better guide than the subject matter present to the reader. However, the appearance of having the ‘whole’ semantic context or entire poetic reality before us – a word which Mahon rhymes with ‘soul’ in “Imbolc: JBY” (67) – precisely makes the poem’s representation of Yeats’s lyrical beauty problematic. If beauty is that “something which the words represent,” the ‘soul’ in Mahon’s poem only goes as far as its “most primitive sense,” and indeed reduces the word to its phonetic form, though quite consciously. For Mahon, what is ideal is a form uninterrupted by any
objections in relation to a presiding subject. Therefore, ‘Nature,’ which essentially refers to “a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature” (E&I 163) in Yeats’s “The Symbolism of Poetry,” invokes the silence of the signified in Mahon’s work: ‘We’re here because we’re here because’ (Mahon, “Art and Reality” 56). While it is possible to ‘tell it as it was’ (57) in Mahon’s work, for Yeats, what is needed for the irrefutable proof of art is the discovery of the solitude of form, which in different ways, shows that it is deeply personal for each poet – and indeed, only strengthening the associations afforded by being an ‘Irish’ poet.

Irish poet Kerry Hardie suggests that the ‘heart’ is that invisible guide in relation to its implicit theme in Irish poetry. Like ‘soul,’ the word contains an authority that is hard to dispose of, similar to a nagging feeling:

And I think what a furious place
is the heart: so raw and so pure and so shameless.
We both drink the water. I drink with defiance
and you drink without it. No one is watching, but God,
and He doesn’t care, except for the heart’s intention. (McAuliffe)

The final stanza of “At St Laserian’s Cathedral, Old Loughlin” shows us how little the ‘heart’ divulges, despite being represented here in its familiar sense. Therefore, as conscious as it is, the word does not explain the symbolic authority inherent in its use in a broader context. Indeed, it cannot, without potentially undermining the whole proposition of the poem of ‘a furious place’ with the curious symbolism produced by the ‘heart.’

Belonging to a similar sort of examination of lyrical agency, Yeats asks in “Coole and Ballylee”: ‘What’s water but the generated soul?’ (8). It seems to be irrefutable that ‘the heart’s intention’ is precisely the key to the symbolism of ‘water’ in this poem, and which appears more evidently Celtic in its context. Hardie’s poem appears to be an attempt to translate its significance for a broader audience.
However, Yeats’s question shows that the process to the finished ‘work of art’ is an agreed pattern for future syllogisms that is connected to the real objective of the poem, to propose the manner in which to read: ‘What’s water but the generated soul?’ Whether this is its authentic context for a literary revival of Irish art, however, depends on the risk that the poet is prepared to take in relation to the memory that the word evokes: its “simple primary sense.” Such a vision is achieved as the separation of written reality from speech, and to its own dialect – what Yeats’s rhetorical question promises. For Mahon, symbolism is a process of words coming into their own reality, as in Hardie’s work. Therefore, ‘No one is watching’ really suggests that the artist discovers his or her own isolation, a dynamic present in a single word, ‘water,’ that unites the dream and reality of performed art in Hardie’s work.

For Mahon, the use of symbols becomes necessary where the poet is conscious of having to make up for the lack of ‘self-knowledge’ (NCP 53). He suggests the literal necessity of a literary revival, where what emerges is a pretext for translation, important for its allusion to the present context when reading Yeats, but for Mahon it is a mechanism that ensures the success of the perspective of the ‘whole’ whose meaning and intentionality continue to be hinderances to nature, or the rhetoric of poetry. As R.A. York says in “Derek Mahon as Translator,” “Always there is the sense of an ‘elsewhere,’ of the text from which Mahon’s own text is derived, which must arouse the reader’s curiosity, but which can somehow not quite satisfy it” (180). Such a ‘text’ cannot be satisfied apart from its self-reflexive drama, which the act of translation promises – just as the basic composition of the symbol belongs not just to itself but to its surrounding context, for Mahon.
If one considers the titles of many of the poems in *Words in the Air* (1998), they each originate from quoted lines or phrases, suggesting that the act of writing becomes a means to the discovery of symbols for speech:

> When the master himself  
> is taken so far so quickly  
> I look for what may follow —

not a lamp of fruit,  
a fearless bird,  
the purest of images,

but water and clean linen,  
the loving hand  
and the obstinate heart. (‘‘Grape and Figs’’ 14-22)

A style that develops for its own sake, an understanding of what gives the ‘work of art’ its significance is not encountered through the imitation of the ‘master’ alone, as the above lines from a translation show us. Although his main grievances are with *The Hudson Letter* and *The Yellow Book*, McDonald in “Incurable Ache” says that: “There is a cruel irony to the fact that Derek Mahon, of all poets, has taken to conflating style with personality” (117). Yet, it is precisely this attitude towards myth that Mahon’s original work examines. Style, if not a different kind of pursuit, consists of a personality that may be directly represented:

> Let self-effacement be my way of blazing  
> and poverty weigh our table down with fruit;  
> death, far or near according to its choosing,  
sustain, as ever, the inexhaustible light. (“That the End Enlighten Us” 13-16)

Likewise, “‘Grape and Figs,’” with its images of ‘water’ and ‘the obstinate heart, could well be a tribute to their importance within a tradition shared with Yeats, and therefore outlast fleeting style. Yet, Mahon is determined to represent that ‘self-effacement’ because of what he fears to be the danger of adopting a particular style: ‘‘When the master himself / is taken so far so quickly.’”
Describing Mahon’s individuality more astutely for us, O’Neill and Callaghan says that: “regardless of the subject matter, there is a sprezzatura, the artist always showing his back above the thematic element he swims in, that recalls Yeats, but also MacNeice” (260). In comparison, McDonald’s commentary does not suggest that Mahon’s stylistic choices actually contribute to some end or goal in his work. The consciousness of tradition is precisely what, as I argue, what Mahon receives from Yeats. Donoghue associates the phenomenon of a “sprezzatura” with what Yeats calls in “Ego Dominus Tuus”: ‘the old nonchalance of the hand’ (Irish Essays 146). Yet, even this action has to be hidden from the poet himself, in order for the admission to have its lyrical force: “(I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made / Amid the dreams of youth)” (“Her Courage” 2 – 3). In other words, the phenomenon of the “sprezzatura” is deemed inaccessible but for the lyrical medium; that is, in a world that was still in possession of the beautiful as a form of consciousness: “when Spenser lived the earth had still its sheltering sacredness” (E&I 365).

The “sprezzatura” for Mahon is achieved, however, as a liberty granted to a poet, though he no longer makes the distinction between master and disciple: ‘I give myself up to these brilliant spaces’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 34). Yet, having lost its “sheltering sacredness,” there is an abiding source of tension with myth in Irish and Celtic art that Yeats’s ‘pagan speech’ serves to represent. Mahon achieves his own version of that myth, by making ‘self-effacement’ a model for his new ‘self,’ a symbol able to generate more poems and translations its own order or kind: ‘Under this clear sky it is I who change – / after so much conceit, after such strange / decadence, but bursting with new power’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 31-33).

Yeats’s criticism of Spenser’s “Paganism” was that his poetic allegory was written with no “standards of probability” (E&I 368), but Mahon’s ‘conceit’ suggests
a moral obligation to these symbols from nature. In other words, contemporary poetry, as represented in Mahon, lacks the distinction of a real tradition, but which Mahon suggests the lyric connects one to, albeit not being the same challenge that is seen in Yeats. In response to a phrase from nineteenth century writer, Coventry Patmore: “the end of art is peace” – which is incidentally an allusion found in Yeats’s “To a Wealthy Man” – Mahon says that: “perhaps we shouldn’t be talking about peace, but only about faith” (Grennan, “The Art of Poetry”). What has been lost, then, is the ability of a poet to refer to the tradition of the lyric directly, suggesting that the beautiful lacks, in principal, its application, regardless of its primary exemplars. Yet, as one sees in Mahon, in place of the “holding of reality and justice in a single thought,” we have something lesser, though the finest kind of reality for him: an individual, or individualistic faith.
The Lyrical Subject

The future of Irish art, which Mahon calls ‘[t]he best place’ (‘The Widow of Kinsale’ 85), belongs to contexts that are more temporal than Yeats’s contributions to the Irish canon through a particular understanding of style or the imagination. Writing within a pastoral tradition whose usual protagonist is found in Seamus Heaney, Mahon uses the knowledge of its genre to demonstrate a kind of attention to the lyric that is present as an ideal subject in his work. It is in Yeats’s work, however, that the artistic illusion is present, not merely generated through the devices of poetic history, but as a reflection of the medium of verse.

The pastoral may evoke a form of patronage but it is also a deliberate critique on the subject of poetic tradition. In Mahon’s work, the notion of a subject is problematised by Irish history. It is in the critique of the uses of nature in Mahon’s work, that his work reflects a more contemporary setting than that found in Yeats. Therefore, the ensuing caution is that its presence may be observed,

not really in the country, no,
but within reach of the countryside,
somewhere alive to season, wind and tide,
far field and wind farm. ‘Wrong life,’ says Adorno,
‘can’t be lived rightly’. The right place
is a quiet spot like this
where an expanding river spills,
still trout-rich, from the dewy hills
of Cork, still fertile in a morning mist. (‘A Quiet Spot’ 7-15)

Mahon does not allow even the quote from Adorno to impede the progression of thought, its ‘expanding river.’ Indeed, we are in the presence of forms of thought that may be ‘listen[ed] to’; ‘leaves,’ the note that the poem ends on, might otherwise not be a very important word. However, as it stands, the image is a utopian vision that defines Mahon’s poem.
Magdalena Kay observes that an epistemology of nature is all but lost in contemporary poetry but argues that the phenomenon of nature is preserved in Heaney’s work, due to him being “a poet in a postcolonial country, where space may be filled with elements not of one’s choosing.” Perhaps in contrast, Kay reads in Mahon’s work a careful “impenetrability” of space (23), which her reading his work shows is due to a “constructed” subject (24), occurring as a result of the interrogation of postcolonial history, for Kay at least. Self-conscious of being the source of the poem’s theme, Mahon’s “A Quiet Spot” attempts ‘the perfect work-life balancing act’ (19) – but only ‘brief[ly]’ (21). What the poem offers readers exceeds what Kay means by a “constructed” as opposed to a real subject; its construction is all that matters finally: ‘Gaia demands your love, the patient earth / your airy sneakers tread expects / humility and care’ (22-24). The directness of ‘Gaia demands’ illustrates what Heaney has called the “personal drama” of Mahon’s work – which suggests, according to Kay, that “the coherence of the subject – the unity of its ‘personality’ – is problematised” (Heaney ctd. in 24).

Indeed, “A Quiet Spot” shows that the context of Mahon’s earlier poem: “Leaves” (NCP 59) bears rereading, at the instigation of a myth that Mahon may be read as deriving from Yeats rather than from Heaney: “Some were looking for spiritual happiness or for some form of unknown power, but I had a practical object. I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul’s” (AV xi). Also serving the theme of ‘peace,’ “Leaves” had proclaimed that: ‘Somewhere there is an afterlife / Of dead leaves’ (9-10). However, it is not in the poetry alone that the poet may discover the signs of the artistic Renaissance that Yeats had achieved in his lifetime. “A Quiet Spot” aspires to be that place, a pragmatic
decision created through an obvious subject. Such a discourse on personality, which the word ‘leaves’ provokes, demonstrates that the postcolonial subject is not the only possible one in relation to Irish history.

The discussion on ‘place’ in relation to Irish poetry is generally unsatisfactory – at least for Mahon. It is the subject of Mahon’s symbolisation of lyrical space, depoliticising Heaney’s nature by transforming the meaning of the pastoral into a form of discourse that imitates Yeats’s history or image of the ‘soul’ spoken of in *Vision*, and which, as I argue, is represented in “Leaves” and “A Quiet Spot.” It is an ideal kind of life, a subject that both ‘lives and dies’ its own life. Neither simply an allusion nor tribute to the original, Yeats’s antithetical mask ultimately evokes the ubiquity of a Yeatsian phantasmagoria: ‘Do we die laughing or are we among those / for whom a spectre, some discredited ghost still haunts the misty windows of old hopes?’ (“Lapis Lazuli” 38-40) Heaney’s favourite first-person plural ‘we’ now slips on as Mahon’s own: ‘[a] whole night-sky that serves as a paper weight’ (1). What this means is that his chosen subject is now in plain view. In the way that Mahon has put it, he says that:

Now, poetry written with permission in warm spaces, there’s far too much of that – and that is the voice of community. What interests me is forbidden poetry written by solitaries [sic] in the cold, written by solitaries [sic] in the open, which is where the human soul really is. That for me is where poetry really is. (Grennan, “The Art of Poetry”; emphasis added)

The purpose of his “solitaries” is in the way they represent a particular understanding of ‘place’ apart from “community.” At the same time, the significance of “the human soul” suggests a ready-made context in terms of artistic representation. Being “in the cold” suggests the possible failure of what Yeats calls “[t]he old theological conception of the individual soul as bodiless or abstract” (*CW5* 22).
Mahon’s lyrical subject, whose ‘communal’ sympathy he invokes in *Harbour Lights*, assumes all the phases and progressions of artistic life. Not unlike a “perfectly transparent or miraculous incarnation” (Adams, *Book of Yeats’s Vision* 96), the voice of ‘leaves’ has become important evidence of what Mahon has allowed to be suggested in his poem – the resistance of the representation of nature through a particular understanding of ‘space’; a true medium for the solitary. Yet, the consequences of ignoring the distinction that Yeats’s mask makes in relation to the soul suggests a disturbing interpretation of poetry as a language that crosses between “nomen” and “[sacred] numen” (Hilton 13) – the names of things and things that belong to their given context. For Yeats, beauty has an important enemy that is not just external; rather, it is found in the understanding of the beautiful. In Yeats’s hitherto unpublished dialogue, “The Poet and the Actress,” the “Poet” says that: “Those who try to create beautiful things without this battle in [the] soul, are mere imitators, because we can only become conscious of a thing, by comparing it with its opposite” (*Yeats Annual* 136).

The lack of a mediator between personality and the artist results in the absence of a proper subject. Yeats had been warned, through his ‘instructors,’ to keep hidden the original thought behind his mask: “the revelation of soul” (Harper 79). It is precisely the spell of the ‘soul’ that nothing exists besides our own consciousness: ‘But names are nothing. What matter who it be / So that his elements have grown so fine’ (“All Soul’s Night” 81-82). The criticism could be that these ‘names’ of things that populate Mahon’s work are an excuse for a more powerful agenda found in the establishment of ‘a famous name’ (“Harbour Lights” 79). Its source may explain why, not unlike the word ‘tree,’ which Kay argues Heaney’s work rescues from the
recesses of history and memory, Mahon’s “Lapis Lazuli” tells us that: ‘Hope lies with her as it always does really’ (46).

For Mahon, his quest for “the human soul” crosses between the image and its ‘revelation.’ Conscious of the sacred as a context more intrinsic to Yeats’s thought, Mahon’s use of the term may be exposed, I argue, as a poetic device in his poetry. Its method suggests that the “battle in [the] soul” can be made visible to the reader. Carmel Jordan tells us that: “The word sacrifice actually derives from sacrum facere, which means to make sacred, and was used in ancient times to describe any act of self-transcending through which the individual sought to attain the divine” (65). Yet, Mahon’s images, through the act of “self-transcending” in his pastoral poems fail to have the autonomy of Yeats’s aesthetic that is found in “a double contemplation, that of the chosen Image, that of the fated Image” (AV 94). Therefore, Yeats’s mask is not the end of the drama, as Mahon notes in “Lapis Lazuli”: ‘Dim in the half-light of conventional rain, / we start at the squeal of Berkeley’s telephone’ (19-20).

Place becomes “a symbolisation of a personal drama” (qtd. in Kay 23), to use Heaney’s observation of Mahon’s work again: the unyielding hope of a living ‘soul.’ Indeed, one may recall these lines from MacNeice’s “An Eclogue for Christmas” which Mahon quotes in “The Hudson Letter”: “We shall go down like palaeolithic man / Before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan” (THL 24). We find Mahon’s ideal personality in “The Hudson Letter” as the discovery that: ‘so did his art conceal his art’ (“Pygmalion and Galatea” 9). In fact, this may explain Kay’s treatment of Mahon’s work in relation to a postcolonial context and history. What I am attempting to do is more closely study the circumstances surrounding Mahon’s “constructed subject.” Yeats’s dialogue on beauty forms an important context for precisely this purpose.
To return to Yeats’s “The Poet and the Actress,” it is important to note how a dialogue depends on something that has always been part of the plot, a subject that has always been an important aspect of artistic representation, without which the very conditions of its actual occurrence become threatened. However, at the end of the dialogue, “The Poet” tells us that: “There is no mask. I have never been in Fez” (Yeats Annual 139). As Yeats says elsewhere, ‘It is never the face itself it is always a mask & a mask assumed for purposes of action’ (VP 81). He practically pulls the carpet from under his elaborate scenery of characters and dialogue.

Nevertheless, the closing lines of Yeats’s dialogue leave us with a moral, belonging to a form of history that has now been named: “the Theatre of Beauty.” As described by “The Poet,” “The religious men created a false faith and they have lost the world, and the popular writers have created a false beauty, and they are losing the world” (Yeats Annual 138). It is important to note that Yeats describes his antithetical mask as being “no doubt the original of the term ‘mask’” (VP 81). Its definition suggests that there is ultimately one aim in verbal art, which is its nondiscursive claim, as Langer explains: “The connotation of a word is the conception it conveys. Because the connotation remains with the symbol when the object of its denotation is neither present nor looked for, we are able to think about the object without reacting to it overtly at all” (PNK 64). As this chapter demonstrates, the differences between Yeats and Mahon lie in the way they each address the action embodied in the “think[ing] about”; the nature of the artistic symbol or illusion which is a key objective of their respective work. This is what Mahon highlights, in comparing his “warm spaces” with the places of his “solitaries.”

Yeats’s definition of his antithetical mask that is derived from the original term suggests a feeling inherent in the term – something that is ideal, according to
Langer, for the artist. Therefore, art is precisely what “can be symbolised but cannot be known” (*AV* 193). As Yeats writes in a letter to an appreciative reader, L.A.G. Strong, on June 25, 1925: “No concrete dream image is ever, according to my experience, taken from the conscious memory” (*L* 709). The language of *Vision* and Mahon’s ‘Sphere-music’ (“Christmas in Kinsale” 39) points to an object of feeling belonging to its particular reality: the ‘spinning centre / of heightened consciousness’ (21-22) depicted by Mahon in “A Building Site.” This ‘centre’ offers to readers an “object of its denotation” not otherwise looked for:

> the great answer
> granted at a glance
> and rained upon at once,
> the magic coalition
> of concrete circumstance — [ . . . ] (46-50)

‘[T]he great answer’ found in the signification of art involves a place or a name that enables the re-introduction of the mode of the pastoral in Mahon’s work. As Williams tells us, “the ‘secular numen . . . which, for [Mahon] surrounds objects,’” is an authority he discovers in place of an actual community. Concerning the significance of place as an illustration of that “secular numen,” Mahon says that: “To me it’s a random, hazardous thing, present in the world, to which we have access. But I’ve never tried to frame it to myself in terms of conventional religion, formal philosophy, magical systems or anything like that” (Mahon qtd. in Williams 321). In other words, Mahon avoids theorising the language of poetry while Yeats’s mask is able to point to a symbol that is “itself an epistemological datum about which we can philosophise” (*F&F* 118).

It is in Mahon’s translations where he finds possible symbolic sites of feeling. His translations of Philippe Jaccottet in *Words in the Air* occasions a definition of what it calls “lyrical abstraction” in his introduction: “a natural scene or object is
teased out until precise subject-matter disappears and we are left with a few brush-strokes only, black on white, which qualify, so to speak, as ideograms — even as haiku, what Grigson calls “a few words in space”” (13). In the way he describes the medium of the translator, Mahon shows us how he is able to generalise about his subject matter, through its disappearance. Mahon uses “lyrical abstraction” as a means of resolving a similar conflict found in Vision, about which Frank Hughes Murphy summarises by saying that: “The final revelation of the system, however, instead of offering a Romantic reunification of the fragmented universe, offers only an insight into the inescapable fact of universal conflict and mutability: fragments that never arrive at wholeness, but struggle eternally toward that condition” (3). According to Yeats, the problem has to do with the artist’s medium, rather than due to an epistemological uncertainty.

It is not for the poet to deal with “actual emotions” (Sacred Wood 58), it appears. However, Mahon is close to precisely making that “Romantic reunification” a reality in “A Building Site,” by positing his own vision:

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  a momentary, oblique
  vision of an unknown
  eternal dispensation,
  the infinite republic
  of primary creation. (“A Building Site” 51-55)
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The poem suggests an ongoing relationship between the poet and Romantic history, which may be seen as a particular understanding of personality. Mahon’s ‘spinning centre’ is an attempt to create a recognition of romantic feeling and its judgement, yet not firstly in relation to his poem but rather in relation to the medium, of the “beautiful thing,” which he implicitly denotes as his ‘centre.’ The beautiful is found in an understanding of history bound to ‘Nature,’ where everything has been done in the service of the very ‘stage’ beauty depends on for its dramatic dialogue.
Yeats’s dialogue, which offers us important information about the relationship between beauty and Romantic history, was written to show “a passion for reality all through Europe,” necessary as it was for the symbolisation of a more personal vision for Yeats. The ‘play’ of beauty to do with the ‘coherence of the subject,’ which we began this final section discussing, departs from the traditional form of the lyric. Therefore, the problem framed as the postcolonial subject, and that is ubiquitous in criticism on Irish poetry, really hides the greater problem of Irish history, for Mahon at least. Yeats explains the dilemma of the representation of a living art depicted in Irish mythology, in the following way: “The dead, as the passionate necessity wears out, come into a measure of freedom and may turn the impulse of events, started while living, in some new direction, but they cannot originate except through the living” (CW5 25).

In a way, history shapes the poetic universe for Mahon. However, for Yeats, it is not just its universe that may be concretely realised as a consequence of it. The very terms that we have to refer to it suggest a dialectical medium that becomes part of the representation of history, as well as poetic memory, in Yeats’s work. Mahon’s understanding of sublime art emphasises the difficulty of Yeats’s achievement of his ideal medium of ‘Nature,’ however:

our children laugh
at the gruff bloke snuffling in the epigraph
and in the window-frame a persistent fly
buzzes with furious life which will never die. (“Resistance Days” 166-69)

The next chapter discusses the introduction of a ‘written’ medium that Yeats brings to bear in his later poetics. Found in the mythology of ‘a written speech’ are its symbols important to the creation of modern or contemporary art, and for Mahon, necessary for the avoidance of the subjectivity of the poetic vision. For Yeats, it was a demonstration of the ultimate pursuit of artistic life.
CHAPTER IV: THE MAKING OF A LYRICAL CANON: YEATS AND MAHON

Introduction

The creation of Yeats’s ‘mask’ reflects the presence of the importance of an impersonal art. Nonetheless, what this translates into for Mahon is a dilemma in relation to the very deed or action belonging to the verbal myths that mediate the ‘work’ of a writer. Mahon attempts to address this problem through his ideal lyric, as discussed in Chapter Two. However, what such a lyric necessarily rejects are myths that belong intrinsically, and are inseparable from, a poet’s work – myths like Byzantium. However, Yeats also reflected how, with the advent of modernity, artistic beauty had become an endangered species. Constrained to its own purpose, then, myth is valuable as a context that is aloof from reality. This, however, problematises the representation of poetry for Mahon that includes the ability to be ‘everywhere.’ As such, the poetic medium is endangered where it becomes the source of a discursive context of meaning that Irish poetry represents. Yet, lyrical meaning is a paradox, rather than only the source of conflict, as Chapter Three suggested, particularly through Yeats’s “the Theatre of Beauty.”

The presence of the conflict between art and nature, then, limits a genuine engagement with the lyric which formed a context for Yeats’s “personal utterance,” as discussed in Chapter One. Thus, in this chapter, I compare how the poets each address the problem of poetic influence, which is a problem of what Yeats calls a “formal music or speech” (E&I 20). In a nutshell, Mahon’s work demonstrates the limits of creating a symbolic ‘canon’ for Irish art. However, Yeats’s ‘mask’ shows that what is needed is a complete ‘canon’ of work that brings together both the poetry and prose of a writer, whose primary defense is found in an “argument with ourselves.” Like the
“virtual time” of Langer’s theory of music, whose existence Donoghue notes in relation to what he calls “formal eloquence” (OE 41), Yeats shows us how his ‘mask’ secures a purely symbolic context for the making of a contemporary canon of art. In other words, I compare Yeats and Mahon in relation to the isolation of an artist, which occurs in different ways, as shown in their respective work.

Nationhood and poethood have always been interconnected in poetry, though Yeats’s and Mahon’s respective work emphasises that this discourse may be responded to in different ways in terms of an Irish poetics. In the later Yeats, ‘Ireland’ stood for the potential of a mythology that otherwise conflicted with his aesthetic enterprise. At the close of “A General Introduction For My Work,” Yeats says that: “I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and after them they are, as Victor Hugo said of something or other, not worth the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet” (E&I 526). For Yeats, ‘Ireland,’ not unlike ‘Northern Ireland’ for Mahon, is not merely the jargon of experience but rather a reflection, a particular attitude towards the subject that goes beyond its use as a journalistic phrase. For Mahon, a more authentic identification with the poetic medium paradoxically deepens for him, like Louis MacNeice, as an exile from such a context. According to Robert Garratt, although “[t]wice-removed from Irish society,” “MacNeice . . . could never quite shake the attraction of the beauty of Ireland” (266). Yet, it is a desire that is implicit in a poetic medium that goes beyond a memory of a place, or even a name: ‘I am not yet born; O hear me, / Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God come near me’ (“Prayer Before Birth” 25-26).
For Mahon, the context of myth frames the work of a translator, offering unprecedented access to places from the imagination that belong to an inherited but also created mythology:

I can see a united Ireland from the air, its meteorological gaiety and despair, some evidence of light industry and agriculture, familiar contours, turf-smoke on field and town; . . . (“Imbolc: JBY” 10-13)

For MacNeice’s readers, the emphasis is on the poet’s memory or perspective, while the reference to ‘place’ in Mahon’s poem is less conservative, freeing the myths of the imagination. The poetry that he writes is always ‘after’ someone or other, while the notion of ‘place’ for MacNeice depends on the projection of a single subject or persona. Therefore, such a personality was ingrained as the mythology of place, while the humanity of Mahon’s “familiar contours” is not far from the surface of feeling.

Modern poetry could not offer its audience, as Yeats saw it, the “construction” of “great drama” (Yeats qtd. in Foster1 536). Yet, the genre is precisely something Mahon is determined to represent, through the work of a translator which “betray[s],” as Steiner says, “the literally daemonic potency of definition, of action, encased in the human word” (After Babel 348).

While MacNeice’s poem depends on a tension created through a balancing act between poetic speech and the ego, it however refrains from revealing the source of his poetic will. In contrast, Kermode says that, for Yeats, “What matters is the concrete, unique, symbolic object, the living, unified body. . . . Upon this body we may press our lips; what we cannot do is to abstract a meaning from it, paraphrase it in terms of our familiar abstractions” (Romantic Image 67-68). Through its nonverbal aspiration, the poet’s inclination towards the subject of ‘place’ suggests that he looks beyond the immediate subject matter, and when he finds his ‘true mask’ apart from “our familiar abstractions,” what we have are the makings of a “great drama.” The
potential of a ‘prose poem’ particularly in relation to Yeats lies not merely in its opposition to poetry; but rather, it suggests an access to a form that reflects even greater awareness of the uses of the poetic metaphor, in the absence of an accompanying creative myth upon which the medium of the ‘lyric’ depends.

As seen in the previous chapter, ‘Nature’ turns poetry into its own subject matter, its very symbolic vehicle: ‘Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing’ (“Sailing to Byzantium” 25-26). Key to a symbolic canon that broadens a definition of the visionary persona beyond that of the romantic ego, is how the respective poets sought a reprieve from the almost overburdening task of ‘telling it as it is’ – or, as Yeats has called it, “a like perfect, a like completeness” (E&I 127). We have seen, particularly in relation to Mahon, that ‘Nature’ – its meaning and significance – refers to an existing medium as a mythological agency, as the primary motivation of the lyrical subject.

Mahon uses the expediency of another “dramatic mutation,” the last of which was “from the English to the Yeatsian,” to highlight Yeats’s precedence in relation to the creation of forms of the imaginative life. Suggesting that the dynamic of Yeats’s vision is what he envisions for his work in 1974, Mahon declares that: “without accelerating timescales, another is taking place now.” Moreover, its image of ‘Irish’ history reconciles all kinds of poetry: “In any event Irish poetry in the 20th century, like poetry everywhere, has been increasingly centrifugal—in Montague’s phrase, ‘a competing multiplicity of styles’ ” (qtd. in Haughton 92). What persists, then, for Mahon is the indirect pursuit of a single personality, though extending beyond the context of Irish poetry. In fact, he implies that a memory of its discourse originates in Irish poetics, but also encompassed an entire century.
In his review of John Montague’s *Faber Book of Irish Verse* of 1974, Mahon supposes to describe the present state of writing, as the start of a historic trajectory for “Irish poetry.” There is a transformation of his role as an individual poet into one whose influence extends to that of a historical fact. Similarly, Martin J. Waters, for example, argues that: “The notion, then, of an ‘Irish peasantry’ with a peculiar ethos somehow remaining outside the dynamics of Irish history… is untenable” (qtd. in E. Hirsch 1117). This search is for an ideal subject belonging to the Irish canon, of whom Patrick Kavanagh also writes about in *The Great Hunger*. His epic poem depicts a place with impregnable meaning, a place like Byzantium; a symbol harbouring the true meaning of lyrical feeling for artists:

There is the source from which all cultures rise,
And all religions,
There is the pool in which the poet dips
And the musician.
Without the peasant base civilisation must die,
Unless the clay is in the mouth the singer’s singing is useless. (13.18-23)

At the brink of not having a place in the world, the peasant is ‘his own master / As it was in the Beginning’ (9-10). This suggests both an actual historical record and the myth that allows such a ‘life’ to be possible. Yeats had collected his *Representative Irish Tales* in part to defend his “conception of the Irish peasant as visionary” (16). He understood the significance of preserving such a subject but he also suggested that his personal influence as a poet paled in comparison with the myth of a canonical lyrical subject.

Nonetheless, Yeats had a part to play in arguing for this perspective, as discovered from the speech of the people, to be ideal. It is precisely an image of “an Irish peasantry” that illustrates an Irish poet’s independence from the written canon in Yeats’s vision. From that visionary perspective, “the Irish peasant” has become separate from his community, just as a poet had become, as a ‘living’ cultural
personality. Through the intervention of ‘his’ personality, the formation of Yeats’s lyrical self as a ubiquitous symbol of Irish life and feeling had become possible. As the following lines from Thomas MacDonagh’s “The Yellow Bittern” demonstrate, the lyrical responsibility separates reality from the imagination for the sake of its symbol:

It’s not for the common birds that I’d mourn,
   The black-bird, the corn-crake or the crane,
But for the bittern that’s shy and apart
   And drinks in the marsh from the lone bog-drain. (9-12)

MacDonagh wrote *Irish Literature*, which was published as a scholarly thesis at the turn of the twentieth century – about the existence of an Anglo-Irish form or ‘mode.’ What is curious is that it was not demonstrated in relation to the major proponents of Irish poetry, which most notably included Yeats. MacDonagh’s claim to have found a way to represent an exclusive feeling while suggesting historical conformity in his study will be explored in further detail.

Not surprisingly, the ‘Anglo-Irish’ canon that MacDonagh refers to has been written to rival the English, and it is almost tongue-in-cheek that the following lines from the same poem demonstrate its implications:

I pity your lot,
   Though they say that a sot like myself is curst –
I was sober a while, but I’ll drink and be wise
   For fear I should die in the end of thirst. (5-8)

The pragmatism of the controversy around an ‘Anglo-Irish’ language is unmistakable, yet it is sensitively wrought in the poem which renders the importance of the identification of an ‘Irish’ poet more effectively than MacDonagh’s theory of an “Irish Mode.”

The notion of eloquence in modern art that Yeats illustrates in his work transforms the presence of the lyrical subject into one that approaches the symbolism
of ‘Irish’ art from an aesthetic, rather than political, standpoint. In Mahon’s work, however, the presence of a lyrical subject is not external to the poetic medium; the importance of its chosen structure is, thus, unable to be proven, as characteristic of eloquence. The ‘lyrical’ canon, as I am defining it here, refers to the adopting of ‘a written speech’ as the source of forms of feeling preserved through Yeats’s mask which may be explained in relation to his “personal utterance.” The creation of these ‘forms’ is fundamental to understanding the work of two admittedly unconventional Irish poets in the first place. As I will argue, MacDonagh’s “Irish Mode” fails to satisfy because of the problem of ‘Ireland’ and its political history that intrudes into his poetics. Tradition continues to represent the importance of poetry in relation to the kind of literary influence that poets hope to wield, and which is achieved where both Yeats and Mahon avoid the danger of politicising its goal, and therefore preserving a belief in the continuance of ‘Ireland’ through its use of myth.
Discourse of Symbolism

Yeats’s understanding of the active role of the poet problematised the representation of the larger world of empirical fact: “I doubt indeed if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation” (*E&I* 158). Instead, he transforms the symbolic status of artists who depict an entire language that is more dramatic than realistic. The language of an artist is expressive and not just reflective of the world surrounding him. At the same time, an understanding of personality that Yeats grants through his ‘mask’ is even more inevitable and uncompromising in contemporary poetry, as Mahon demonstrates. In isolation of that ‘world,’ however, the medium that Yeats’s prose masters, consists of a whole language that is otherwise bound to a particular time and place in literary history. In other words, Yeats truly reflects the modern condition – one that both belonged to the twentieth century as well as to a phenomenon occurring within his understanding of the poetic ‘medium.’

While Yeats is determined to portray art as transformative of its own medium of representation, Mahon strives for a lyrical craft that exposes its myths, particularly in their direct bearing on a poet: ‘No, no; get up; go on to the next phase — / body, shake off this meditative pose’ (Mahon, “The Seaside Cemetery” 127-28). Mahon, by eschewing the postmodern, emphasises the realism of his lyrical context, whose structure, as Chapter Two has shown, transforms into a ‘leitmotif’ or “leading theme” (Latham) that can be found ‘everywhere’ – even, he concedes, on ‘a raw strand where Cúchulainn fought the waves’ (“Harbour Lights” 66). Edna Longley says in *Poetry and the Wars* that: “Mahon’s stanzaic skill serves a poetry of statement pushed to prophetic extremity: not full-throated Yeatsian declamation, but the rhetoric Yeats
might have produced had he entered more fully into either the *fin de siècle* or the modern city” (175). For instance, a simple phrase like ‘down there’ in a number of Mahon’s poems is used to signify a sequence or order whose theme foregrounds the myth of a self-sufficient medium that has been considered in Chapter Two. Its presence suggests sympathy for, and even a certain dependence on, a belief in lyrical eloquence.

However, in order to prove that his system of nature in *Vision* was not a contemplative one, Yeats makes it clear that the terms he used did not conceal a personal symbolism: “I had suggested the word *tincture*, a common word in Boehme, and my instructors took the word *antithetical* from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*” (72). These words represented the direction his prose would eventually take under the influence of beauty as a system of thought. Yeats’s understanding of poetic craft chooses to emphasise, instead of the autobiographical, the ‘conspir[ing]’ of signification within the lyric: “Perhaps, for I have endless proof that, where two worked together, the symbolic influence commonly took upon itself, *though no word was spoken*, the quality of the mind that had first fixed a symbol in the mind’s eye” (*Aut* 261; emphasis added). To make the distinction, Mahon’s mode of representation rests on forms of speech that are gathered from ideas his poems generate. While their original forms appear to be preserved for Mahon; that is, where *words* are the forms that he speaks of, for Yeats his ideas represented everything necessary for a symbolic system in *Vision*.

Precisely because of, as Longley points out, Yeats’s suspicion of rhetoric, he referred to a prose subject to point to the ‘whatness’ of his thought and symbol; or, as Yeats puts it himself: the “mystery *and* shadow” of a poem (*E&I* 87). However, as his
critique of Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ shows, for Mahon, the subject of a poem is precisely what hinders access to the actual poem:

Silence, the first thing they have in common, creates a little precise hole in the uproar and the vague sorrow between man and woman changes summer to autumn as they conspire like scientists working from the same data. (Mahon, “New Wave” 10-14)

Mahon’s “poetry of statement” simply refers to a vehicle that points to the genre; it is the realisation that this is what he made An Autumn Wind out of: that which in appearance is nothing more than a gesture of ‘silence,’ because it does not contain a subject, in the first case.

The stanza is, however, in Harbour Lights one way in which the poet conceals what he, literally, makes his living on: ‘I live on sufferance of this ravenous thing’ (120; emphasis added), as he says in “The Seaside Cemetery.” In his interview with William Scammell, when asked: “How did you arrive at the stanza form you use in ‘The Hunt by Night’? Borrowed, invented, evolved?” Mahon’s response is to depict the whole scene as a process, rather than what might be expected a clue to its technique: “Evolved, I seem to remember, very slowly, word by word, as if putting paint on a canvas: staining the silence, improving (I hope) on the blank page. Poetry, I often think, is a visual art among other things” (6). In other words, he seems to be making the point that: “Poetry” is finally something to be summarised into a single statement; by “a visual art” he means a “silence” that has the potential of making all the difference for the poet: ‘I am the secret difference now in you’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 78) he says, alluding to the fact that something like the stanza could be unchanged, and yet be remarkably different.

In this way, in the following lines, the theme of an entire stanza identifies itself through the use of a single connective:
But even as fruit consumes itself in taste, 
even as it translates its own demise 
deliciously in the mouth where its form dies, 
I sniff already my own future smoke 
while light sings to the ashen soul the quick 
change starting now on the murmuring coast. (“The Seaside Cemetery” 25-30)

Therefore, Mahon’s stanza is on condition of the ‘sufferance’ of its limits, for the responsibility placed on the poet to contemplate the source of personal expression, leaves one with the realisation of many forms of the same thing: ‘Self-love, self-hatred, what’s the difference? / Its secret mordancy is so intense / the silent gnawing goes by many names’ (115-17). ‘[T]he ashen soul’ is the result of the dynamic of the stanza and the knowledge of its visual presentation, where its meaning is obtained through an authentic interaction between the speaker and his reality. In this way, Harbour Lights may be read to be a preface to Mahon’s entire work.

Echoing Eliot’s reference to it in his essay on Yeats, the “anthology syndrome” is, as Craig Dworkin insists, “the common practice of reading lyric poems in isolation” though it “presents a rather skewed view of the poetic process” (4). Yet, this is precisely what “The Seaside Cemetery” offers to readers: a definite “view of the poetic process.” Moreover, it shows us Mahon’s ability to extrapolate from what may be gathered up as the objective ‘data’ of a poem such that everything else has become secondary. Explaining how this happens, Van de Kamp says that: “The symbolist poem in isolation . . . prompts us to discover its relevance, which it receives from the symbolist’s other works” (128). In this way, “The Seaside Cemetery,” a translation of a symbolist poet, acts only as it appeals to readers in relation to other poems of similar structures. Moreover, the point that a critic like Longley makes is that “Mahon’s stanzaic skill” suggests many more poems from where they come.

In his interview by Eamon Grennan, Mahon says that: “In putting together the Selected Poems I tried to manufacture belatedly a homogeneous voice, but, in fact, in
those early poems there’d be one man on one page and a totally different person on
the next page. To my ear anyway” (“The Art of Poetry”). What this implied for Yeats
was different, because the very importance of his “personal utterance” was to settle
the problem of a voice being absent in the first place from any reading a poem, at
least in relation to its performance. Mahon, however, appears to concede on his
failure to find a single voice, and for this purpose, precisely underpinning such a
perspective, in his interview with Grennan, he says that: “I invoke a circle of friends,
a reading society. I didn’t realise that at the beginning, but I was creating a circle of
friends.”

As Mahon’s “The Seaside Cemetery” shows us, lyrical form takes on the
rather forbidding role of the poem’s ‘I’; and according to Sidnell, it was desired by
Yeats as the discovery of “the originating source from which all the poem’s dramatis
personae issue” (Yeats’s Poetry and Poetics 36). Yet, this has often led to
compromise, as the study of the fictions that Vision employs, for instance, rather than
to the study of his technique. If so, the motif that is central to Mahon’s Harbour
Lights suggests that Yeats’s art belonged to what was already present within the
poetic medium to be represented – as a metaphor as well as a symbol. The possibility
of an antitheticality that is predominant in its uses in a poem requires what Yeats had
called “the memory of Nature herself” (E&I 28). It is in this way that the ‘lyric’ finds
itself as the subject of central significance. This ‘I’ in Yeats implies, as Sidnell says,
“the projection of a time-bound self-presence, traced in speech, that his readers get to
know . . . as a personality” (36). Such a personality, as Mahon suggests, is accessed
through the interrogation of a consciousness of speech that perhaps results in a similar
understanding of what the ‘lyric’ stands for in the two poets.
‘A Poet Not in the Theatre’

The discovery of verbal myths in the written tradition of the Irish lyric shows that Yeats did not merely seek out a dramatic medium for his art. Rather, it was what he had personally undertaken to represent: “The chief difference between the metaphors of poetry and the symbols of mysticism is that the latter are woven together into a complete system” (qtd. in Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats 25). The narrative mode in poetry was essentially an artifice, and this may be seen in relation to the proposition of ‘speech’ in Yeats’s work, and how it presents a critique of the poet’s medium. It is important to the consideration of dialectical art in this thesis that I compare Mahon’s creation of lyrical art with the ‘written speech’ that is central in Yeats’s art. The conclusion that Sidnell makes, in relation to Lady Gregory’s role in its application is that: “the achievement of ‘a written speech’ is the forging, in its time, of an instrument of Anglo-Irish hegemony” (“Yeats’s ‘Written Speech’ ” 2). As it occurs in both poets, the idea of ‘speech’ precisely fulfils the requirements of poetic aspiration. In Yeats’s case at least, it pointed to Lady Gregory’s vision of “the beautiful speech of those who think in Irish” (qtd. in “Yeats’s ‘Written Speech’ ” 1-2).

Yeats’s art argues for the lyric as the symbol of a living tradition. Its medium, for Mahon in particular, is a way of framing the lyrical voice as a preoccupation with modern art, in what might be called a “[l]iving poetry,” “a more living upon a more conscious” (Barfield 179). It is not simply with the adoption of tradition that the “living” is concerned, but rather, the past in relation to an awareness of the present, for both poets. The consequence of this is a tradition created through the recognition of an existing canon, and which significantly for Yeats was an aural one. Such a canon inevitably involves the poet’s understanding of the role he plays in it, roles that
are thus different for Yeats and Mahon where the latter is largely informed by the
written tradition of Irish literature. Sidnell argues that the role of tradition is borne out
most evidently in Yeats’s narrative art that is characterised by “examples of old myth
performed in the present.” Yeats’s treatment of myth was, thus, an existing
framework for his oral medium. Yet, this was precisely why the function of myth fails
in his later work, according to Sidnell: “I say later lyrics because, by reason of the
strange phenomenon that I have attempted to account for, the impersonal literariness
of much of Yeats’s earlier poetry lends itself to recitation better than the inscripted
speaking personality of the later” (Yeats’s Poetry and Poetics 29). Sidnell faults
Yeats’s later lyrics on the quality of his personality, which seemed to have lacked the
commitment of his earlier poetry.

However, Sidnell’s quarrel with an “inscripted speaking personality” is that it
confuses readers in relation to a Yeats whom he suggests we know well. A critic’s
interest in Yeats involves the symbols that his work has always been written to
explain: the mysticism, but also epistemology, of his mask – or the lyrical voice.
However, Mahon’s Irish writer extends the boundaries of “mysticism” to include
everything ‘poetic,’ a synonym for the word if there ever was one. As Mahon’s
“Imbolc: JBY” shows us, Yeats’s ‘written speech’ is a dynamic not easily
encapsulated. Nonetheless, the personality implied by his definition of speech coming
into words is the primary object of a poem where Mahon deliberately invokes the
‘Yeatsian’ spirit, whose title invites us to celebrate a culture familiar with the
‘occultic’ arts. The poem ends by returning to the apparent source of the poem’s
inspiration: ‘in your own words’ (THL 57).

The poem emphasises the body of fate of Yeats’s ‘own words,’ spoken forth
as it were in the poem, as if at a particular moment in history. Their living influence
embodied in a feeling belonging to the original utterance has been erased, yet the consequence of that is precisely the illusion of harmony – between the poem and the poet’s voice. Sidnell’s problem with reading this harmony into Yeats’s later work has to do with the fact of Yeats’s live readings of his poetry. These recitations – a particular personality and memory that the critic alludes to – become represented in Mahon’s poem making the very idea of the poet’s ‘own words’ something of a poetical event in their own right.

In a collection that has been criticised by Patrick Crotty for “the sometimes banal truth of the discursive verse” (qtd. in Kennedy-Andrews 171), what Mahon may be read to aspire towards was the ‘sublimation’ of Yeats’s own mask. Yet, in this way, it discounts Yeats’s own psychological block with print – but, more importantly, it limits Yeats’s understanding of the “living voice” to an existing medium of words. The poem’s ability to confuse the original utterance with its adopted façade in the poem precisely results in Yeats’s ‘poetry of life’ which Mahon preserves through the use of quotation marks in “Imbolc: JBY” – as a feeling that is not just a projection of the said poem. An aesthetic which Yeats’s father epitomised to an absolute degree in terms of his convictions, his understanding of beauty, however, was what Yeats had separated himself from through his dramatic experiences. This conflict was apparently never resolved between them. John Yeats had written to his son Willie some eight months before his death, in June 1921, saying that: “It is easier to write poetry that is far from life, but it is infinitely more exciting to write the poetry of life, and that is what the whole world is crying out for. I bet it is what your wife wants – ask her. She will know what I mean and drive it home” (qtd. in SP 73).

In the poem, Mahon finds a necessary distance from “the poetry of life,” which appears to become problematic when it attempts to represent life as a form of
criticism: ‘“After so many deaths I live and write” / cried, once, Geo. Herbert in his Wiltshire plot; / does lightning ever strike in the same place twice?’ (“Global Village” 41-43) This could very well be the reason why Patrick Crotty finds sections in The Hudson Letter “slack in conception,” and where even more are “slacker again in execution” (qtd. in Kennedy-Andrews 171). Nonetheless, we find perhaps Yeats’s greatest imitator in Mahon who does not resolve the ambiguity present in a medium that has transformed for the modern poet: ‘— But also, in your own words, lived and died / like all of us, then as now, ‘an exile and a stranger’?’ (“Imbolc: JBY” 74-75)

Yeats could not entrust his ‘vision’ to the printing press. Edward Engelberg says that: “between the written tradition (which [Yeats] had at first distrusted) and the unwritten he began to see affinities, that the one had built on the other” (50). These “affinities” had to be imagined but, in this way, they made up for what was lacking in the notion of ‘tradition.’ The medium of contemporary poetry has, in other words, become a vehicle of abstraction. In this way, however, mutatis mutandis, we have as a consequence the lack of a real vision:

Still, in the brisk heart a faint voice will speak.
in a star-lit corner of the soul there sings
 to an enclosed loved one the intense troubadour
 in his quaint language, and his rondeau sings
 resiliently on the vineyards, streams and rock-
strewn hillsides of 12th-century Languedoc; . . . (Mahon, “Domnei” 5-10)

At the heart of the original tradition of symbolism, according to the poem, is an admission that it could all have been ‘a vicious fiction or a coercive myth’ (32).

Yet, Yeats’s understanding of the theatre of words implies a poet’s personal understanding of his medium – thereby avoiding its political meaning. Through the controversy of ‘a written speech,’ Yeats avoided the consequence of dissolving whatever separates the tradition of beauty from the recognition of the mythology of the Romantic vision. Instead, Yeats had discovered an implied narrative voice in his
plays, and therefore, an arbitrary unity of feeling. Synge, however, hedges on an important point, when he says in “Vita Vecchia” that:

We do wrong to seek a foundation for ecstasy in philosophy or the hidden things of the spirit—if there is spirit—for when life is at its simplest, with nothing beyond or before it, the mystery is greater than we can endure. Every leaf and flower [and] insect is full of deeper wonder than any sign the cabbalists have invented. (24)

While Mahon’s poem visualises ‘an enclosed loved one the intense troubadour’ frozen in time and space; a collage rather than an ‘inscribed personality,’ Yeats needed an even more radical ‘source’ to confirm the existence of his subject of beauty.

Without the myth attributed to ‘a written speech,’ we miss what Yeats achieves – a system of mysticism which distinguishes between symbols and metaphors, important to a discovery of the source of ‘nobility’ or the sound of words, as Wallace Stevens shows us, lacking in contemporary poetry: “There is no element that poets have sought after, more curiously and more piously, certain of its obscure existence. Its voice is one of the inarticulate voices which is their business to overhear and to record” (35). Its eloquence is what we are concerned with, which does not exist without a poet’s words, but also cannot exist apart from them: “A poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words” (32). As Sidnell puts it: “Recitation of the later poems risks making Yeats’s rhetoric seem exaggerated, self-parodic or merely bogus, for the representation, or image, of speech is deeply inscribed and may be inwardly heard with such clarity that in performance we hear double, as it were” (36). Such an observation admits that the “image, of speech” belongs naturally, rather than being a complete mystery in terms of its origins, perhaps the reason why Mahon says that Vision “is really a sort of political book” (SP 71).
Donoghue notes in *Irish Essays* that: “Pound thought he could escape scepticism ‘by assuming a self of past years’; by re-writing his early poems, he could touch ‘a stronger passion, a greater confidence than I possess, or ever did possess’” (93). In comparison, I argue that Yeats had anticipated the reception of the poet’s self where it emerges as a myth, as shown through his concept of the “anti-theatre.” For Yeats, “art is a revelation and not a criticism” of life (*E&I* 197). A poet’s words are only the beginning of an understanding of personality, for which Yeats’s “ideal reciter” (Schuchard 216) was important. Synge, according to Eliot, resolved the problem of a “too poetic” speech by finding characters for his ‘poetry,’ equivalent to the ‘speech’ of the “country people of Ireland”: “[He] wrote plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetically, so he could make them talk poetry and remain real people” (*On Poetry and Poets* 82). What both Synge and Lady Gregory had needed were their “originals in life.” Synge, however, encompassed the moral symbolism of the poetic utterance for “the world of magical beauty [he had] dreamed of” in the orchestra (15), while Yeats had declared that:

> I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never too many . . . I want to make . . . a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people. . . . I seek, not a theatre but the theatre’s anti-self. (*CW* 8 131-33)

The establishment of Yeats’s “anti-self” went beyond simply the rejection of the early mysticism of his work.

As I argue, Yeats’s genius necessitated the theatre as his model, but more than that, it was a sign that he had employed the myth of a ‘written’ tradition as a resource for the imagination. Eliot appears to have shown admiration for the lengths that Yeats went to, in order to establish the effects of speech. Its theme, of a particular form of theatre, was evident with the success of the play, *The Words upon the Window Pane*,

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which “seemed not only to please the poet but to astound him” (MacLiammóir and Boland 104). However, for Eliot, it was Yeats’s *Purgatory* that “laid all his successors under obligation to him” (83). *The Words upon the Window Pane* was written “in what, for [Yeats], was a strangely realistic manner, describing a séance held by a spiritualist medium (a woman), through whose lips the ghosts of Jonathan Swift, Stella and Vanessa speak” (103). That Swift stands out as the only non-fiction character in this list suggests that he was particularly important to Yeats, whose voice he needed in order to create an authentic context for in his play. Yeats’s ‘theatre’ of words – and which Mahon’s *Theatre* is an unmistakable response to – as evident in his introduction which makes a direct allusion to Yeats – is a timely reminder why Irish literature has continued to thrive today. As Donoghue puts it, “In any event, theatre is the art most congenial to [Yeats’s] rhetoric and to his sense of life and form. When he draws upon the theme, he recurs to the same range of words: self-mastery, difficulty, discipline, the antithetical force, theatre, style” (Donoghue, *Yeats* 44). Donoghue uses the phrase ‘recurs to’ that echoes the very movement of a ‘leitmotif,’ implying that the influence of the theatre in Yeats was purely formal. The idea it evokes is characterised by struggle, something which tells us his lyrical personality survived on the very created “rhetoric” of the theatre that Donoghue identifies. When Mahon notes that “as later poems like ‘Lapis Lazuli’ go to show: everything is dialectic, truth and counter-truth” (*SP* 73), he is suggesting that Yeats’s later work provokes an encounter with a medium, and not just with the poet’s subject matter. This, in turn, afforded an expansion in the themes he became sympathetic to, albeit as a ‘recurrence’ of the same.

In this way, Yeats’s dramatic personae could be said to be ‘leitmotifs’ of his medium – and its “discipline,” as Donoghue puts it, meant that the theatre was no
longer a generic restraint. Eliot’s caution in relation to Synge was that: “[t]he poetic prose dramatist who has not this advantage [of ready actors for his speech], has to be too poetic” (On Poetry and Poets 82). Yeats found a solution to the finiteness of his spoken medium by registering his interest in dramatic speech as an ‘anti-mask’ in Vision. It was the achieved impersonality of his later work that T.S. Eliot had appeared to be most impressed with in his speech in 1940 at the Abbey Theatre, on the occasion of the first Yeats lecture to the Friends of the Irish Academy, when he said that Yeats “had to wait for a later maturity to find expression of early experience” (qtd. in Donoghue, Irish Essays 84). Yeats’s ideal subject was directly formed from within his own oeuvre – and its implications meant that his interest in the theatre did not forge the development of his lyrical method apart from being a part of it. He did not introduce a new style but rather defined it according to his mastery of it.

Through the theatre, Yeats discovered the limitations of a ‘mask’ that invariably judges the effectiveness of a work. The solution posed itself in Vision through a particular attitude towards the value of a ‘musical’ image, which is described by Pound in a letter to John Quinn in the following way: Yeats “will be quite sensible till some question of ghosts or occultism comes up, then he is subject to a curious excitement, twists everything to his theory, usual quality of mind goes” (Selected Letters 168). It was not that he was fickle but that his understanding of “the image and its abstraction” (Ure 48) was intentionally self-imposed, and more than the usual formulation of speech: Eliot suggests in “Poetry and Drama” that Yeats finally “solved his problem of speech in verse” (83).

Yeats saw the dramatic lyric as a relief from an invisible enemy. For Mahon, it signifies that the lyrical ‘I’ no longer poses a hinderance to an artist; moreover, as a translator, there could be no better theme, but for Yeats he also demonstrated why it
had to be the same one. In effect, what we see in Mahon is that the Yeatsian ‘anti-self’ has become less vivid than the endless but harmonious interaction between reality and its opposite.
The Music of Syntax

The world of literary poetics, in Yeats and Mahon, involves the idealisation of an ‘Irish’ aural reality that is found in the revelation of a particular atmosphere or mood associated with it. Hugh Haughton says in “Place and Displacement in Derek Mahon” that: “I can’t think of any parallels among English poets for Mahon’s metaphysical unease, his sense of damage and civilisational desolation, his sense of displacement and disenchanted mobility, or indeed for the poignant elegance of his lyric music” (90). Haughton suggests that there is something peculiarly ‘non-English’ in Mahon’s work. By attempting to make it untranslatable, however, what is paradoxically taken for granted is the representational capacity of the poetry. Yet, it is precisely the “lyric music” of Mahon’s work that limits it to a tradition that is intentional rather than inevitable, as seen in Yeats in relation to his revival of the Irish literary imagination. The above reflects the crisis of verbal representation in their respective oeuvres through the means offered by the development of “nonphonocentric criticism” (Reed 278), or criticism that works with the understanding and limitation of poetry as a ‘written’ genre.

Yeats had failed to appeal to a Gaelic-speaking audience on the basis of his linguistic proficiency. However, what he was creating was a purely formal reality when he spoke of the impact of speech as performance in Speaking to the Psaltery:

The relation between formal music and speech will yet become the subject of science, not less than the occasion of artistic discovery. I suggest that we will discover in this relation a very early stage in the development of music, with its own great beauty, and that those who love lyric poetry but cannot tell one tune from another repeat a state of mind which created music . . . [i] [t]o it the music was an unconscious creation, the words a conscious, for no beginnings are in the intellect, and no living thing remembers its own birth. (E&I 20)

Yeats’s understanding of musical eloquence, or “a musical relation, a beautiful relation” (E&I 157), makes him firstly a modern poet before he was a poet from an
Irish literary tradition that he also helped to create. Somewhat differently, there is more than a suspicion that Mahon’s work does not just do justice to an ‘Irish’ tradition, but rather, an earlier stage of its formal discovery. Yeats had sought to describe through his concept of musical feeling a systematic way of analysing a different kind of lyric altogether.

In their passionate interest in “beginnings,” both Yeats and Mahon demonstrate that, as the famous opening line from Keats’s “On the Grasshopper and Cricket” goes: ‘The Poetry of earth is never dead.’ The idiom of an Irish oral reality continues, belonging to an identity that requires exploration in both poets. The key to the importance of Yeats’s ‘musical’ eloquence was in the mysterious source of the unity of the ‘practical arts’ found in drama. Yeats’s “personal utterance” was not firstly the discovery of a genre, but rather, the practice of what he had called a “living voice”: “If we accomplish this great work, if we make it possible again for the poet to express himself, not merely through words, but through the voices of singers, of minstrels, of players, we shall certainly have changed the substance and the manner of our poetry” (Expl 220). In this way, the verbal world of poetry stood for a specialised form of communication.

The prolific composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein argued in the concluding lecture of “The Unanswered Question” Charles Eliot Norton Lectures in Harvard in 1973, concerning the future of music, that music holds the remnant quality of the affective nature of language. Bernstein insisted that the very metaphor poetry needed is found in music whose forms he suggests is inherent in our knowledge of grammar: “by metaphorical operation there can be devised particular musical languages that have surface structures noticeably remote from their basic origins, but which can be strikingly expressive, as long as they retain their roots in earth” (“The
Keats’s ‘poetry of earth’ was a concept that Bernstein used in his effort to associate music with an inherent language of poetry, as an abstract image upon which the burden of the implications of a universal myth lay.

However, Bernstein failed to stress an important aspect of reading poetry, which is found in performance. He could not finally explain the source of the interpretative context he required for a “field of inquiry” which he called “monogenesis, denoting the theory of all languages springing from a single source”; a context necessary to his description of music as a theory of communication. Yeats, however, by foregrounding the function of words as ‘words,’ give them a more specialised function than that of an abstract understanding of poetic language. His ‘musical’ eloquence contains a personality that distinguishes “[t]he metaphors of things” and “things themselves,” as distinguished by the “youthful Goethe” before him (ctd. in Yeats, UP 120). In this way, ‘music’ is no longer a mask for a singing voice; rather, it is the insistence of a motif in their respective work.

Yeats’s aesthetic of the “living voice” made him a stronger poet than any other claim that could be made on his behalf, in relation to his posterity. Brian Reed explains that: “A written text and a live performance are not related in the manner of original and copy. One might precede the other chronologically, in which case one can talk about its ‘transmediation’ from one medium to another, but they remain different instantiations of the same work” (Reed 278). Yeats develops an aesthetic of a “written text” precisely by making this distinction, transforming its precise significance into a myth. As Yeats writes in “Samhain: 1906—Literature and the Living Voice”:

It is perhaps nearly impossible to make recitation a living thing, for there is no existing taste we can appeal to; but it should not be hard here in Ireland to interest people in songs that are made for the word’s sake and not for the music, or for that only in a secondary degree. They are interested in such
songs already, only the songs have little subtlety of thought and of language. (CW8 104; emphasis added)

Concerned with songs from a less cultivated culture, the ‘musical’ arrangement of folk lyrics could not impress Yeats. Instead, I argue that he defines the ‘musical’ to mean a personality or context carved from the knowledge of the primary use of words.

We may observe the care with which Yeats takes with describing the source of “recitation [as] a living thing,” which goes beyond a mere interest in poetry as a genre. For him, it was the possibility of a living influence that was “perhaps nearly impossible.” It is in this way that both Yeats and Mahon appear to share a common expectation in relation to the poetic medium. T.S. Eliot had made a note when he read Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism*, that there are at least two aspects of mysticism – that of “emanations and immanence” (Lockerd 69). For Yeats, “songs that are made for the word’s sake” are words that are performed as “emanations” whose primary source is the written page. While “immanence” emphasises a theory of life, as “emanations,” these “songs” originate from a source that Yeats explains through the mediating personality of a reciter, and Mahon, of a translator. These images or “emanations” have the ability to transcend their own subject matter, and are therefore important to the poet, a key to modern poetics. Yet, modernist poetry alone did not define Yeats – described by F.R. Higgins in his interview with Louis MacNeice, as being “most modern without being modernist” (Muldoon 17).

An important convergence between the poetics of Yeats and Mahon lies in their respective efforts to deal with the problem of the ‘immanent’ word, albeit in exile, challenging the very boundaries of their vocation. As Yeats had said concerning his reciter: “His art is nearer to pattern than that of the player. It is always allusion, never illusion; for what he tells of, no matter how impassioned he may become, is
always distant, and for this reason he may permit himself every kind of nobleness” (Expl 215). In a similar sense, Jeffares emphasises that the inspiration of Yeats’s stanzas lies beyond the genre, saying that:

[A] characteristic of Yeats’s poetry is his mastery of syntax that enabled him to place a complete sentence within a stanza and to weld these sentence-stanzas into the expression of a mood, a thought, an argument. The balance of the stanza within a poem is well-judged; the reader is left with a sense of satisfaction, a recognition of the aesthetic, architectonic integrity of the whole, the ordering that came from so much careful construction, the ‘stitching and unstitching’ that took so many hours of concentrated work. (Poems of W.B. Yeats, 392)

The above analysis of Yeats’s work illustrates that “the ordering,” or what Yeats had called “stylistic arrangements of experience” (AV 25), of words gave priority to the “integrity” of his forms. Their “architectonic” landscape is derived from an unconscious, rather than conscious loyalty to an understanding of the poet’s medium as “a mood, a thought, an argument.” While the ubiquity of that landscape is necessary to Mahon’s poetic voice, Yeats had gone to great lengths in his theory of the reciter to prove his chosen medium; that is, how his voices of singers were important for “the emotional abstraction which delights in patterns of sound separated from words” (E&I 20). Mahon assumes, in other words, the “verbal sense” of words (UPI 120-21), but its structure was firstly evident as an “intellectual symbol” for Yeats (Albright, Quantum Poetics 117). It was a myth that made the unity of the spoken tradition and its written forms possible.

Yet, critics had found that Yeats was distinguishing needlessly between music that is heard and the musical mood he wanted to recreate in his art. Yeats was after something even more concrete – for the production of “fine verse” (E&I 14) was not irreversible. It is the myth of ‘expression’ that an analysis of Yeats’s implied medium points to – found in, as Jeffares shows us, a sentence that belongs to no particular verbal genre; rather, it is simply important as the art of ‘expression’ which Yeats’s
'lyric’ fully encompassed. Yeats’s concept of “Unity of Image” was the source of a reasoned feeling, one like: “the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and . . . the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi” (AV 25). His ideal cultural image does not suggest something intrinsic in his method but rather created. For Mahon, it was as though a last resort; the success of his method depends precisely on the extreme limitation of personality that makes all other subject matter mere rhetoric: ‘The flesh is weary / I’ve read the books’ (“Harbour Lights” 4).

It is no coincidence that it is a modernist poet who identifies the ideal subject for a lyrical poet. What Ezra Pound considered as “the strict relation of word and tune – motz el son” (Ezra Pound and Music 31) could not emphasise more the fundamental experience of ‘living’ poetry. Yet, like Eliot’s interest in it, music also suggested that a whole tradition of formal creation is strictly of the past rather than of an invention belonging to the present. The connection or “relation of word and tune,” unlike that between “formal music and speech” for Yeats, had already being fixed for Mahon. His Paris Review interview with Eamon Grennan, Mahon highlights “word and tune” (“The Art of Poetry”) as the method of his work, a declaration that smacks of an ambition to substantiate his chosen medium – the ‘word’ that, in its most absolute sense, carries the burden of an intrinsic or ‘musical’ eloquence. This has direct implications for reading each poet. Daniel Albright says, in what may be a good description of ‘musical’ eloquence, that “in the language of symbols, the ‘word’ counts more than the sentence. The sentence . . . its extension is precarious” (Quantum Poetics 117). Nonetheless, by implication, Albright also appears to be arguing for the “sentence” as a form of “emanation.” Belonging to a convention out of place in the poem, the “extension” of a sentence did not have the ability to secure the reader’s attention, at least in its entirety.
Each of these sentences, however, is the discovery of a mind conditioning the reader to an alternative structure of lyrical experience that lies beyond the ‘line,’ becoming the context to address the isolation of a lyrical poem:

Re-reading history page by lamplit page,
imagine the lost poems of Inion Dubh,
I could be living here in another age
except at week-ends where the bikes converge. (“Harbour Lights” 18-21)

The implied structure derived from ‘[r]e-reading’ suggests that each ‘history page’ has been transformed to reflect a myth rather than the poem as a generic convention. Declan Kiberd explains the bardic tradition, and the effect of its demise on poets as that which seems to have left poets without a context: “The price for which the sensations of modernity may be had: ‘the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock’. . . . they paid that price and looked up into a sky without stars” (Irish Classics 20). Yet, the “disintegration of the aura” gives Mahon’s poems essentially the whole motivation for forms like the ‘sentence’ and the ‘stanza’ presented, and characterised, in renewed light. Both of these forms, one might say, assumes a direct parallel of “word and tune” upon which lay burden on the poem to speak, while Yeats saw in his melodies more than an accompaniment to poetry, and indeed, belongs apart from it. In this way, precisely by looking for forms of feeling, what is presiding over them is a context of ‘prose,’ or the presence of a poem that has become elusive for a modernist poet.
Music and Lyric

As this thesis argues, lyrical performance includes a dramatic setting that defines the work of an artist. For Yeats, such a setting occurs as it is being shaped by aesthetic discourse. The later Yeats re-imagines his lyric as the place where artistic discourse originates. Mahon, however, shows us that the ‘difficult spirit’ or the genius of poetic history is something that leaves the poet with some ambiguity in relation to the precise ‘reality’ of his lyric. Therefore, as I argue in relation to an understanding of ‘musical’ eloquence, the condition of the lyric is something a poet might or might not be able to prove. For Yeats, the existence of music is crucial in relation to how words might achieve a spoken quality. For Mahon, its “virtual” medium or history is manifested as the avoidance of solipsism, suggesting that the crisis of a poet’s voice originates through knowledge rather than intuition. More evasively, then, Mahon’s An Autumn Wind settles for the sheer force or possibility of lyrical form: ‘but everywhere day breaks / on water and a washerwoman / sings to her own reflection’ (“Water” 19-21). I discuss the dangers of ‘musical’ feeling as a form of rhetoric, whose goal Mallarmé’s ‘Lyric’ fully epitomises.

The symbolist writer, Mallarmé, proposed that his ‘Lyric’ represented a whole world of interpretative possibility. Unlike Yeats, rather than a presentation of the limitations of discourse, Mallarmé shows the ‘Lyric’ implies a superior action by the artist. Through his ‘Lyric,’ Mallarmé appears to have solved the problem for a literary artist by suggesting a source of symbolism that continues to be an exception where literature is concerned. At the same time, it was a response to how the nondiscursive arts belonged to an understanding of form that is the literary work of art. What was of primary importance for Mallarmé was a distinction between the verbal medium of words and the mythic source of the ‘Lyric’: “Both Music and Lyric call for the
previous discarding of the spoken word, of course, in order to prevent mere talking” (qtd. in Bucknell 31). Eloquence was a confidence that an artist was also in possession of, with sufficient proof, of a ‘supplement’ of nature.

Mallarmé organises the experience of art into a single thought: that ‘Music,’ and ‘Lyric’ possess corresponding structures that are necessary for their symbolism. In its essential form described by the poet, the ‘Lyric’ is a vehicle for expressing his distaste in ‘program music.’ ‘Music’ was absolute, as Mallarmé saw it, and perhaps ironically, this was the reason for his interest in the poetics of the work of art: what he had called “the intellectual and written word in all its glory” (qtd. in Bucknell 25). Like Mallarmé, both Yeats and Mahon deal with the lyric through a theory of ‘speech’ but the actual expectation seems to have been removed from Mallarmé’s ‘Lyric’ precisely with the development of ‘Music’ as a key to it. In comparison, I argue that for both Yeats and Mahon the very idea of ‘music’ resists any other manner of reading the ‘lyric,’ while it is an extension of the same medium for Mallarmé. Music, in other words, could be left unaccompanied, whereas Mallarmé had sought the very ‘form’ of it.

However, what Mallarmé does not have, in relation to “the intellectual and written word,” is a mythology derived from an understanding of speech, or the spoken word. While Mallarmé appears to suggest that ‘Music’ is indispensable to the ‘Lyric,’ according to Brad Bucknell, the discovery of the ‘word’ as a symbolic medium is where his theory is least practical for artists: “We are voided and refilled, or voided and encased (like some shell inside an empty room); in effect, we will transcend by not transcending, become ‘immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality’ by virtue of the Book that will at once empty and recuperate ‘all earthly existence’” (25-26).
At the same time, for Mahon, ‘speech’ retains its importance as a medium that is exempt from any cultural or pre-existing context: that is what ‘music’ means, a message that needed for Yeats “the arts of every country” in order to be conveyed. Therefore, for Mahon, ‘music’ suggests what the ‘lyric’ should achieve: ‘Twinkletoes in the ballroom, / light music in space’ (Mahon, “Light Music” 1.1-2). Yeats, however, suggests that ‘music’ in the first place represents a treatment of the verbal medium: it begins, in other words, with the ‘word,’ while it is precisely glossed over, as Bucknell suggests, in relation to Mallarmé’s ‘Lyric.’

In different ways, then, both Yeats and Mahon show us that the lyric, serving the very objective of art, is an attempt to speak about itself. The problem is in demonstrating how the ‘lyric’ is a nonverbal medium, whose problem of representation thus lies with the notion of ‘music.’ Mallarmé’s ‘Lyric’ is something naturally unattainable for the verbal artist, and therefore does not truly address the role of myth as a ‘musical’ language able to be adopted by other artists equally. Musical form or eloquence is nothing less than the condition Gadamer calls the “I-lessness” of language: “The word should be the right word. That, however, does not mean simply that it represents the intended object for me, but rather, that it places it before the eyes of the other person to whom I speak” (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 65). However, apart from being a tribute to a particular kind of symbolism, Mallarmé’s ‘Book’ could not explain the difference granted by the verbal medium for a creative artist. As Yeats notes in his *Autobiographies*, “for to [write a book] is to exchange life for a logical process” (*Aut* 461). Addressing this, Gadamer’s “right word” stands for a form of knowledge that appeals to an awareness of a medium as a tool for speaking about art, without assuming that a verbal representation is available.
In other words, ‘music’ presented the limitations of a medium and not just its medium, for the later Yeats. Mahon, however, insists that the importance of personality overrides the concern for such distinctions, suggesting that his work is revealing of a character rather than a personality. However, for Mallarmé, it was his own personality that he had hoped to create out of the illusion of his ‘Lyric.’ In this sense, Yeats offers a better observation of the medium, and its ‘real’ implications for the individual artist. He had, for instance, redefined the idea of a medium normally used to reflect the facts of a private life. Opening the significantly named “Estrangement” section, made up of “Extracts From a Diary Kept in 1909,” Yeats shows us that Autobiographies was written to demonstrate an alternative to a “logical process” of writing a book. The arrangement of The Trembling of the Veil was all about proving the substance of the literary life for Yeats: ‘Because I seek an image, not a book. / Those men that in their writings are most wise / Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts’ (“Ego Dominus Tuus” 73-75). In a way, Mallarmé’s foray into the ‘Lyric’ was an attempt to write a literary exegesis, failing which his metaphysical ‘Book’ became an anticipation of that ideal.

Music is therefore the presence of a dramatic medium that is able to enliven the role of speech. As such, Yeats’s ‘most wise’ accept their poverty of experience in describing such a medium – and which is precisely evidence of a particular sensibility that his poem depicts. They also prove the necessity of the “tragic generation” of which artists like Mallarmé, as well as Lionel Johnson whom I consider in the following section, apparently illustrate for Yeats. Yeats could not discover through Mallarmé’s life how the experience of the lyric could be translated into an unmistakable aural reality: “Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by ‘the trembling of the veil of the Temple,’ or that ‘our whole age is seeking to bring
forth a sacred book’? Some of us thought that book near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again” (Aut 315). However, Mallarmé remains a dominating presence, suggesting that his ‘Book’ gives us an important clue to reading the significance of ‘musical’ eloquence in Yeats’s mature work. In this way, Yeats’s Trembling of the Veil finds suitable dramatis personae, and as we will see, one consequence is found in the discovery of Johnson’s strangely literal life of letters.

Music was also a belief that the discourse of beauty is a prevailing discourse on and about the form of the lyric – Yeats’s myth of ‘Time’s last gift, a written speech’ (11), a phrase from “Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation,” used by Sidnell to address the fundamental key to the poetics of the later Yeats. This ‘written speech’ sets a different predicament for poets after Yeats, including Mahon, making it almost impossible for them to discover a different approach to the lyrical form, apart from its myth. Mahon’s work shows us that it is a ‘futile strife.’

At the same time, it is precisely in opposition to Mallarmé’s ‘Lyric’ that Yeats demonstrates what is essential to the art of prose. Its myth and the sensibility it evokes is forced to be rhetorical for Mahon – as a form of ‘speech’ that is able to be traced to the poet’s autobiographical self. In an essay on Aidan Higgins called “Gin and Cloud,” Mahon tells us about the legacy a writer could leave for his readers, and not just posthumously: “A writer’s writer – even, as was said of Henry Green, a writer’s writer’s writer – Higgins has taken more seriously than most Beckett’s injunction to ‘fail again, fail better,’ in that he works continually at the same material; for all is autobiographical, ‘life as story told’” (SP 194). This ‘life’ is a most sublime mode of representation of, and for, the Irish artist, lyrical or otherwise, as Mahon’s essay implies. Yeats’s ‘written speech,’ unlike Mallarmé’s “intellectual and written word,” could be demystified without hurting the persuasiveness of his poetics. In so far as
Yeats accomplished that deed, his ‘written speech’ effects the transition between the bard, or the poet’s poet, and the very mask of the poetic personality that is contained within an aesthetic of the written ‘word.’ The future is a distinctly poetic legacy that remains lacking in Mallarmé’s idea of music, but whose idea of the ‘Lyric’ nonetheless emphasises an important aspect of nineteenth century art, which suggests that his ‘Lyric’ continues to be an influence in relation to the modern lyric.
In Pursuit of the ‘Living Voice’

For Yeats, the theatre is equally a return to, as well as an establishment of, a conviction of words as a measure of the quality of the literary imagination: “The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty” (*E&I* 170). It was the quest for the “sovereignty” of theme that made the art of the reciter central to the lyrical quest for the later Yeats. The lyric, in this way, embodies a whole system of symbolism that he applied as the culmination of a poet’s career. In relation to an Ibsen play, *Rosmersholm*, Yeats’s estimate of it was that: “there is symbolism and a stale odour of spilt poetry” (*Aut* 280). This was despite the play featuring his favourite reciter, Florence Farr. I argue that Yeats’s ‘written speech’ was necessary to bring attention to the verbal resources of the poetic imagination, a theme that is manifested in his prose, particularly in his *Autobiographies*. It is integral to the discovery of the arts in Yeats, which is how Mahon’s work may be measured against his predecessor.

In particular, Yeats spoke of his friend, Lionel Johnson, in his *Autobiographies*, who was a better critic than a critic of life, which Yeats suggested was because Johnson did not have the resources to sustain his desire for something greater than the illusion he maintained, found in a sympathy of feeling he would otherwise have shared with Yeats. Johnson could not realise that he excelled in poetry – more than he did in arguing for a life that was entirely conceived in an artist’s mind. As such, the origins of such a dramatic life were suspect for Yeats; it was Johnson’s vocation that limited him from the proclamation of ‘reality and justice’ rather than an alternative symbolism for verbal art. As Yeats noted: Johnson “would contend that I had no right to consider words made to read less natural than words made to be spoken” (*Aut* 307; emphasis added). Johnson, in other words, saw the dramatic lyric
as a solution for the ‘nobleness’ of a writer. Perhaps for a similar reason, Mahon’s ‘ephemeral prose’ (“Harbour Lights” 141) is given the responsibility of naming the purpose of the lyric. As a vehicle for “things to come,” the lyric for Mahon is the source of a more ‘decaden[t]’ history that suggests forms of experience emerging from an understanding of poetic form that may be more convenient than a poet may be willing to admit. Yeats’s convictions about his dramatic medium, however, belonged to a genre that defended his vocation from an inability to associate the growing importance of the lyrical voice to an adequate criticism of life.

To evoke the semblance of a creative life, Johnson was relying heavily on a form of reverie that belonged not to actual conversations with people, but rather, to his almost indiscriminate reliance on these imaginative encounters as a source of new ideas. For instance, Johnson has claimed that: “Newman has said: ‘I have always considered the profession of a man of letters a third order of the priesthood!’ ” Relevant as the above could be as an anecdote of a life, these imaginary conversations were dangerous in implying an amount of experience that could not have accumulated from real life. In exposing this in Johnson, Yeats demonstrates that what was lacking is a medium perfectly capable of exposing the ‘illusion’ that Johnson had lived completely. Johnson had spoken of the basis of a poetic medium apart from the myth of ‘speech.’

However, it was in this way that the lyric, for Yeats, had become established as the inherent medium for oral recitation – the “natural” medium for a poet. Yet, to speak of that medium, Johnson could not have explained what it meant for such a medium to be necessary to a poet, apart from the need to secure it in a memory of a different world altogether, one that was quite literally belonging to the imagination.
Instead, it was an expression of Yeats’s own taste that Johnson’s words are not detached from their original arrangement, as when we hear Johnson’s Welsh “love-song,” whose impact is appreciated within Yeats’s prose, presented in very the arrangement his song wrought:

O, what are the winds?
And what are the waters?
Mine are your eyes. (Aut 306)

It mirrored how the writing of autobiography for Yeats meant that he no longer had to build an entire life based on facts and experiences: “From the beginning I was determined to write ‘not autobiographies in the ordinary sense, but reveries about the past.’” (qtd. in Foster 526) Instead, the experience of these “reveries” brought into his understanding of art a process that could embody what he sought for: an artistic life. Likewise, Yeats’s reference to Johnson for his critique of the artistic life simply showed the necessity of what Yeats saw to be a sign of a certain phase that yielded nothing of what Johnson himself actually saw or heard.

Mahon has a very definite impression of what his poetry represents, as he tells us in “Rock Music”: ‘Cinema organ, easy listening, swing, doowop, bebop, / Sedate me with your subliminal sublime’ (17-18). The artistic life, for Mahon, is the fundamental belief that the isolation of the artist, which Yeats interrogates in relation to Johnson, is the an achievement of the lyrical medium:

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 bumph could save us now. (5-8)

Mahon’s understanding of the ‘lyric’ demonstrates, as an indication of the very ‘figure’ of the modern imagination, that what mattered, and still matters, is not just any notion of personality, but rather, the voice that comes ‘round again’: ‘Self-love, self-hatred, what’s the difference?’ (“The Seaside Cemetery” 115) These terms are
really different versions of the same living medium for Mahon – the conception and symbolisation of the ‘self’ in relation to the ambition of a lyrical artist.

For Mahon, this is precisely what is integral to contemporary art – the presence of the living memory of artistic discourse, in the way *An Autumn Wind* undoubtedly echoes Yeats’s essay, “An Autumn of the Body”: “I see, indeed, in the arts of every country those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call ‘the decadence,’ and which I, because I believe that the arts lie dreaming of things to come prefer to call the autumn of the body” (*E&I* 191). Yet, while his essay examines lyrical form in relation to the “things to come,” for Mahon the answer to postmodernism was *already* found, in the ‘lyric’: ‘surviving even beyond the age of irony / to the point where the old stuff comes round again’ (“Remembering the ‘90s” 28-39).
Reading ‘Ireland’

To read both poets together is to attempt a symbol out of a mythology still most fully satisfied by ‘Ireland’ – perhaps making a case for an Ireland as a last soldier remaining in an otherwise dogmatic world of reality. The twentieth century represented the promise of an alternate poetic history. At the same time, for Irish art, the modern tradition occurs at the height of a specifically ‘lyrical’ creed, one that is shared by Yeats and Mahon. The consequence of the ‘reality’ of Ireland for both poets is found in the vocation of a modernist poet. In the presence of a written tradition, his occupation embodies the necessary condition of the ‘past’ that the modernist canon possesses, as well as the ‘present’ that it brings forth. In his interview with Scammell, Mahon employs the term “Ulster poet” (6) to refer to himself and his peers. However, Mahon is also inconsistent in his reported sentiments to the region, instead using this term to point out that a specific geographic time and place may even exceed a poet’s ability to speak of it. As Mahon shows, in so far as it continues to be important to a poet in the twenty-first century, the Irish lyric holds the ability to anticipate the future as well. Moreover, this is the difficult terrain that a modernist poet has to tread, in a postmodern world.

According to Stan Smith, speaking in terms derived from MacNeice’s commentary on Yeats in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, ‘Ireland’ is like a symbolic site for discursive experiment:

What emerges from [MacNeice’s] account is the status of ‘Ireland’ as a discursive practice, an ideological construct, given material substance to the extent that it structures the way in which any situation is experienced. The discourse sets up its own interference patterns, and the dilemma thus created can be resolved only at the level of language. (65-66)

Therefore, such a “construct” becomes the prototypical example of how “Paradox becomes the figure to contain an historically insoluble complication” (66). Despite
being averse to the practice of assuming the substance of ‘Ireland’ regardless of its situation within a literary text, Mahon appreciates the possibilities enhanced not just from association, but rather, through its renewal.

Instead of a reconsideration of its theme in his poetry, Yeats’s emphasis on the boundaries of nationhood encourages the perception that there is a new vision of art at stake. As Yeats says in “Four Lectures, 1902-4”: “The nations of the world are like a great organ. And in that organ there are many pipes. Each pipe is a nation, and each pipe has its own music, that is the life of that nation” (Yeats Annual 115; emphasis added). The image or ‘music’ of a nation marked its primary defence against the presence of a political façade. In not being the material source of Yeats’s ‘Unity of Image,’ ‘Ireland’ is not a form of knowledge to be “foreknown or fulfilled.”

Like ‘Ireland,’ then, is what is known by Yeats as “the thing that happens,” an older or more ancient metaphor that music stands for. In the tale of Oisin, a legendary poet-figure in Irish myth, who, when “asked by Saint Patrick what was the music that Finn and the Fianna loved best to hear,” “told the holy man that the best music was the music of what happened” (M. Heaney 170; emphasis added). According to Padraic Colum’s version of the tale, the “holy man’s” response to the question was: “the music of the thing that happens” (MacDonagh xxii). Seamus Deane says that: “Yeats’s audience belongs to no immediate time. It lives in the future or in a past which will be the future. Between these two modes of time, past and future which is the more past, intervenes the cataclysm or crisis” (45). Yeats demonstrates how ‘form’ is the ‘spirit’ that the discursive arts interrogate, precisely because of the evident presence of an image of music where an ‘Irish’ poetics is concerned, as we will see in the following section.
The “crisis” of ‘Ireland’ may be illustrated as an attitude reminiscent of Yeats’s understanding of the lyrical subject, as found through an Irish literary history: “We call certain minds creative because they are among the moulders of their nation and are not made upon its mould, and they resemble one another in this only – they have never been foreknown or fulfilled an expectation” (CW 8, 64). The invention of the mythology of ‘Ireland’ was complete despite a skeptical reception to the apparent revival of its art and culture in the nineteenth century. Alternatively, Mahon gains access to a similar understanding of ‘Ireland’ as a ‘paradox’ that is gained through the process of writing. Like MacNeice, the subject of Mahon’s work is composed through an understanding of the inevitability of the past, yet only as a source of mythmaking brought into the present.
Prose: An ‘Irish Mode’?

Not unlike the responses provoked by *Vision*, which I considered in the previous chapter, the temptation is to mistake the mythology of ‘Ireland’ as a system of symbolism that we are meant to use and apply to Yeats’s poems. Yet, it is also erroneous to say that ‘Ireland’ has no relevance at all to his later poems. The meaning of ‘Ireland,’ not unlike the eloquence found in a lyrical term, does not arise from ‘what might be said’ about it. Such a term may however portray the intrinsic characteristics of its intended subject, as Donoghue does, when he argues: “If eloquence is a factor added to life, what it mainly says is that nothing necessarily coincides with itself: in passing from existence to expression, there is always the possibility of enhancement. Positivism is a tedious lie” (*OE* 41; emphasis added). When one presumes to be a critic of life, we lose the capacity of its very utterance. This is the source of life as well as art, something fundamental to both Yeats and Mahon: “There is only one thing… worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” The epigraph of Mahon’s “Rue des Beaux-Arts” (*TYB* 41) is a quotation from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that echoes the conflict or dilemma for the artist.

This was the risk that Yeats’s experiments in dramatic speech had undertaken: that the claims of beauty could be forged through description or commentary. In relation to an influential twentieth-century critic, Donoghue remarks that: “Blackmur needed instances of ‘something almost being said’ as incitements, holding out the possibility that his eloquence will say something more or other” (*OE* 79). That “something more or other,” however, suggests that good critics are not primarily concerned with an existential argument about art – perhaps because its argument cannot be made without losing something in its regard. There is a gap or ‘cleavage’ in
the understanding of ‘realism’ for the modern critic, where a discussion on art and reality becomes absolute and categorical. If so, the critic is unable to know his precise relations to his task at hand, particularly if it is in the presence of the object of criticism. For Yeats, it was found in the theatre, whose audience he hoped to symbolically revive. He also turned it into an opportunity for a myth of verbal reality, one that a Symbolist poet would only love to claim for his art.

Such an audience existed not simply as an appreciation of a particular style but rather because it was part of the dialogue of the ‘theatre’ for Yeats in his essays and prose. As the addition of A Woman Young and Old to The Winding Stair and Other Poems shows us, Yeats did not need two separate occasions to represent his ‘living’ medium. On the other side of the coin, for Mahon, it is only through the transformation of being “[a] writer’s writer” that a poet discovers an opportunity to assert the condition of reality without being inflicted by it, as “Imbolc: JBY” shows. Without revealing the “positivism” of an identity, its myth belonging to the dramatic character of the poem leads to the entertainment of, and recognition ‘that the universe might be really “magical,” sir’ (66).

The introspective portrait of his early work has matured into poetry that is more fully encompassed by a living artist, embodying a reality found ‘outside’: ‘“Our first task,” said Athene, ‘is to stow / your gold and bronzes in the sacred cave / and then decide on where we go from there”’ (Mahon, “Ithaca” 39-41). Thus, the covers of Mahon’s Harbour Lights, Life on Earth and An Autumn Wind each reflect a change of emphasis rather than theme. Part of the ‘magic’ of “Imbolc: JBY” was to employ something that could be overlooked in the analysis of eloquence – whose foremost critic remains, as the poem proves, the twin occupations of ‘art and reality’ that straddle the work of modern poetry. Using the words of Cyrano, the star of Cyrano de
Bergerac, it is never too late for a poet to pen his formula for lyrical success, which is: ‘at the very least to strike out with panache, / surprise an eager audience, cut a dash / and fight for my convictions’ (Theatre 265). In other words, Mahon’s poem has something behind driving its otherwise – what Susanne Langer calls – “a hundred per cent symbolic” art (F&F 59). Yeats says in “Magic,” regarding “Solar symbols [that] often call up visions of gold and precious stones,” that: “I do not give these examples to prove my arguments, but to illustrate them” (E&I 48; emphasis added). If ‘art and reality’ are autonomous realities, it is because they arise from the very context that a critic claims to critique, thus redeeming it for the reader.

Yeats was supposedly told by his instructors: “Only speak of those actual machineries of the philosophy that may be in the book” (CV xxxv), but we should think of this as less a restriction in terms of the truth-reality of Vision, than an example of what the book may mean to the writer who embodies it. In order for this formal, but in no way merely conventional, context to be restored, Donoghue suggests the importance of a return to the study of “formal eloquence” which he describes himself as having been immersed in as “a student of lieder at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, where I strengthened my conviction that formal eloquence was the only good reason for the existence of music” (OE 41). In other words, music as a statement of a more absolute lyrical reality involving the “existence” of personality remains ambiguous even as it is deemed necessary in the creation of art.

The quest for ‘realism’ allows the inference of “the existence of music,” having become an instrument for the critic to dictate ‘form,’ albeit from a distance. Wherever taken up as a characteristic of art, as Donoghue says, the notion of eloquence almost always transforms the theorist of music into a critic of reality: a mere “servant on the lookout for [instances of eloquence]” (OE 79). Alternatively, in
“Rue des Beaux-Arts,” provoking that very ‘realism’ through his bold announcement, Mahon declares that: ‘The new art is everywhere with its whiplash line / derived from pre-Raff ivy and twining vine, / its biomorphic shapes, motifs of cat and moth’ (1-3). For its peculiar acquisition of almost unidiomatic words such as ‘cat and moth,’ we are almost persuaded by the deliberateness of these ‘shapes’ rather than baffled by the feeling of distance they evoke in the reader. Therefore, the actual discovery of the ‘new art’ Mahon speaks of; that is, his visible craft, is not what is important. Rather, it is how the phrase points to this ‘art’ as an exclamation of a reality that a lyrical poet discovers, as in a more prosaic dream. This ‘new’ prose brings together the traditional and lyrical on the one hand, but also what is distinctly modern on the other hand. This is the distinction that Donoghue’s “formal eloquence” makes, which takes its cue from Langer’s keen understanding of a medium that assumes to imitate the very conditions involved in the coming together of art and its discourse. For instance, by saying that Langer’s philosophy of “virtual time” offers the most persuasive account of a “theory of music” there is (OE 41), Donoghue is suggesting that it is also the only theory of meaning worth exploring.

As opposed to being critics of life, the poets demonstrate an appreciation for an image, of “time” that underlines the very basis of their art. This is important to be examined in relation to the emotional reality involved in the creation of lyrical meaning; and the extent to which it may be described for artists. Music was a guide for nineteenth-century formalist critics like Thomas MacDonagh, a contemporary of Yeats. It stands for the knowledge that a critic implicitly has about his chosen text. It was important for a critic like MacDonagh to establish anew a discourse about his intended lyrical object – the Irish lyric, and the apparent conformity its tradition offers. According to him, found in Anglo-Irish poetry written in the “Irish Mode” is
“a tendency to make the line the metrical unit.” Importantly, in relation to its
definition of eloquence, its method implies an “almost equal stress value to all the
syllables” (73) whose model, as it turns out however could not be easily replicated.

To justify the importance of the image of a “line,” and its transformation of
our reading experience, the English ‘foot’ is made to look restrictive. The suggestion
is that it is unable to be relied upon as a formal device. Therefore, it is precisely its
technique that requires demonstration, as Eliot’s campaign for a sincere poetry
showed. Verse was a simple but important embellishment: that of its ‘fact.’ The only
fault of the genre was that he had insisted on it, which was evidence of something we
could not know without Eliot’s handling of it:

if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be
said, it follows that it will not be ‘poetry’ all the time. It will only be ‘poetry’
when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry
becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which
the emotions can be expressed at all. (On Poetry and Poets 78)

With the disappearance of the oral roots of poetry, it is evident that poetry had now to
face a new genre, which Eliot’s prose instinctively grasps; in other words, the writer’s
medium. Eliot and Yeats both ventured to preserve the identity of the poet, albeit in
different ways. Eliot made a connection between the dramatic force of verse and the
‘written’ eloquence of poetry that allowed him to identify a single “form of verse.”
However, Yeats also spoke of a style that he did not already possess, in “What is
‘Popular Poetry’?”: “I set to work to find a style and things to write about that the
ballad-writers might be the better” (E&I 4). However, for Eliot, the notion of verse
already belongs to the ‘medium’ he spoke of which was “the only language in which
the emotions can be expressed at all.” Yeats was also aware of the distinctions,
between English and Irish verse, for instance.
MacDonagh, however, explored the origins of a rather different imagination despite describing a similar medium. Concerned as he is with something more than a mere “depart[ure] from the natural word order,” he does not suggest the reason for the variation, while Yeats proposes in his essay how: “I always knew that the line of Nature is crooked, that, though we dig the canal-beds as straight as we can, the rivers run hither and thither in their wildness” (E&I 5). Even with these seemingly ordinary sensations, however, Yeats achieves something more than MacDonagh, who, while defending his system of versification, suggests that there is no explanation for the “natural” rhythm of poems (73). Therefore, it is by default that his “Irish Mode” belongs to a single imagination, a dimension implied in MacDonagh’s work. Without an analogy for the ‘Unity of Image,’ MacDonagh, in his aloofness from English verse also estranges Irish verse from what it could potentially claim, for Yeats: a ‘[p]ardon . . . for a barren passion’s sake’ (Yeats, “Introductory Rhymes” 19).

For Eliot, the dramatic force of speech was the poet’s material advantage, but was precisely the source of the difficulty of Yeats’s attempts to create “the written tradition which has been established upon the unwritten” (E&I 6). The symbolic status of speech was Yeats’s contribution to the world, just as music represented for Eliot the loosening of prose from the strictures of ‘poetry’ or the distinction he suggests in relation to the sensitive, modern artist. In his letter to his contemporary, Yeats had tested the possible implications of MacDonagh’s analysis of poetic form, but he seemed to find a description of its potential in Irish art lacking. MacDonagh’s “metrical unit” merely emphasised the necessity of a more ‘natural’ system of lineation but apparently missed its implications:

I never wrote to thank you for your book on Campion. I read every word of it… Your distinction between song-verse & speech-verse is thoroughly sound & I shall look forward to what you write about chant-verse. I find it extraordinarily difficult to explain to any, my own system of scansion for I
have very little but an instinct. I believe that in blank verse that *almost any line of ten syllables* that does not end with an ‘of’ or ‘and’ or ‘a’ or ‘the’ *can be so sustained by previous lines and the lines that come after it, that it will (then) make a regular blank verse line*, but as the accent develops the verse forms grow more rigourous… (qtd. in Devine 157)

In short, the essence of a single line should be able to be translated into a means of translating an actual voice – which Yeats’s “chant-verse” represents, in this letter written in 1913. The ‘line’ would have been the fruition of the experience of a mature poet.

Thus, MacDonagh’s “Irish Mode,” more than simply describing an existing canon, strives for a more exclusive interpretation of his ‘Anglo-Irish’ poets. Yet, this was probably what made his dictation of an “unstressed” line potentially useful. His “line of prose” allowed him the liberty of its reality, but without pointing to its origins more widely than necessary:

Indeed I should say that effects of our more deliberate Irish speech on our verse are these two: first, a prose intonation, not monotonous, being saved by the natural rise and fall of the voice, a remnant of the ancient pitch—a quality, as it were, of *chanted speech*—and second, a tendency to give, in certain poems, generally of short riming lines, almost equal stress value to all the syllables, a tendency to make the line the metrical unit. (72-73; emphasis added)

The promise of this new meter depended on how far it was able to suggest a particular “voice” that an audience could be found to be in agreement with. However, Yeats’s “chanted speech” was the result of an imagination imposed on his art, while MacDonagh’s theory of the ‘line’ only gives readers a glimpse of its real source. Devine insists that: “Though MacDonagh was confused about ‘a uniform stress’ . . . he was right about the line as the metrical unit in much Anglo-Irish verse” (157).

MacDonagh assumed the exclusivity of a native form for Irish verse. The sentiment behind an ‘Anglo-Irish’ mode of writing was finally controversial in terms of its claims, but in turning to speech, Yeats had found an unlikely friend.
It remains difficult to explain the uniformity that MacDonagh’s “Irish Mode” proposes: that is, its point of view, however judiciously he puts it, particularly in terms of the reliance of his study on the “the music of the thing that happens.” For instance, the effort to constrain the “line” into a typical utterance is not supported by “punctuation or the like” (68). What MacDonagh’s scholarship exposes, then, is a method that relies on his description of the “Irish Mode.” However, as Yeats proves, it is not in a ‘written’ anthology that the source of its significance may be found.

MacDonagh’s Literature and Ireland is finally undermined by an insistence on the ‘mystical’ capacity of verse, whose platform Yeats attempted more successfully with his “popular poetry.” Yeats did not spurn the mythology found in MacDonagh’s study: “The best music is what happens,” as he notes it in his essay “Prometheus Unbound” (E&I 422). However, its myth-status meant that the origin of the thought undermined its own claim, at least for MacDonagh. As Arthur Symons says: “Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings” (Symbolist Movement 5). It was true that the coincidence of MacDonagh’s study with Yeats’s experiments in speech is significant, but it still does not explain how the latter had honed the craft. The ‘line’ is not something to be acquired, as a symbolist technique; what is even more important is the personality behind it to be read – or heard. Yeats did not write a textbook about it, there were no set instructions available. Rather, if the ‘line’ was part of the symbolic memory of the nineteenth century, it represented the imagination belonging to a particular revolution in Irish art. As Devine puts it, “like Callinan and Mangan, Yeats knew when to make a line sound almost discordant so as not to sound like what Synge called a ‘worthless tawdry commonplace jingle’” (Devine 149).
This, then, is the central difficulty of MacDonagh’s study: the ‘line’ was absolute, the manifestation of an aural reality in its absence. It became a need to convert the unconverted, and this became his artistic life. Thus, Carmel Jordan describes MacDonagh as “the ‘conscious’ craftsman who sees himself as a creator of beauty,” and who says, in the words of Fitzmaurice in his play, *Pagans*, that: “I am going to live the things that I have before imaged. It is well for a poet that he is double-lived. He has two stores of power” (qtd. in Jordan 82). Fitzmaurice was more than a fictional persona who spoke on behalf of MacDonagh – his presence was as important as what the play *said*. Likewise, his “Irish Mode” represented what was to be his contribution to Irish literary history. However, it fails to discover its predominant genius – founded as it is on his personal convictions.

Although MacDonagh, as Yeats notes, also spoke against “the destructiveness of journalism here in Ireland” (*Mem* 178), Yeats had differed from him in terms of his confidence in the results of political action. The image of the ‘musical’ line for Yeats referred to a way of seeing words as imagined translated into the very ‘thing’ which they represent. In relation to Yeats’s letter to MacDonagh, Devine observes that: “Yeats is groping towards a final acceptance of his own unit of rhythm: *the line itself* – though, of course, Yeats was for a long time both moving towards this idea of the line as the staple unity in a poem’s rhythm and using it in practice” (157-58). Yeats was the better rhetorician for he shows that what might happen is a more powerful force than history. Evidently, the image of the line was not in any way inherent to a poet’s work, yet it *could be*, therefore representing, as Yeats shows, an emotional history unanalysable in its specific contribution to an otherwise monumental style belonging to Irish verse.
Imagism and the Image

The knowledge of the myth of the written tradition is as essential today in the context of reading poetry, as it was in Yeats’s time. However, any reflection of its symbolic status risks the suggestion of an old garment ready to be discarded, instead of being evidence of a ‘living’ tradition, whose understanding is consciously courted in Yeats’s work as a deterrent to rhetoric, through an aesthetic that may be traced to personalities like Swedenborg and Blake, as shown in his essays. Therefore, for Yeats, it is not just for the sake of its myths that his mythology of ‘a written speech’ works, as the evidence of an aesthetic feeling alive in modern poetry. I attempt to compare Yeats and Mahon against a poetic tradition that is both informing of the origins of Yeats’s created mythology as well as the myth of the ‘modern’ in poetic art. This is reflected in Mahon’s work, as I argue, precisely in terms of the kind of subject matter used in his representations of poetic memory that appears to be more anthological than personal, as it was for Yeats.

Blake’s understanding of the poetic image was accompanied by a withdrawal from the symbolism of Nature. Jacob Bronowski makes this evident when he says that: “A sound sympathy drew Blake to the Gothic; nevertheless, that rootless taste did him harm. For it misled Blake, who could have faced the new, to give a false prophetic worth to the fakes of Ossian and the Sublime” (24). Blake’s interest in mythology went beyond the fanciful to something that was resident in the way he approached art. It was thus that the later Yeats had negotiated the relationships that he had with poets like Pound who represented an effort to reinterpret the objective of ‘great art,’ whose myth in Blake suggested the possibility of the abandonment of the constraints of ‘reality.’
Without having been lost to a poet, tradition was what determined the cycle of artistic experience. Yeats’s pursuit of eloquence meant the rejection of the abstraction of Romantic feeling and experience. Therefore, there was instead the realisation of an ideal ‘speech’ that embodied or framed the ultimate goal of the ‘lyric’ for Yeats:

An impulse towards what is definite and sensuous, and an indifference towards the abstract and the general, [which] are the lineaments, as I understand the world, of all that comes not from the learned, but out of common antiquity, out of the ‘folk’ as we say, and in certain languages, Irish for instance—and these languages are all poetry—it is not possible to speak an abstract thought. (CW5 55)

In this essay, “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places,” Yeats emphasises the myth of ‘a written speech’ implied here to embody ‘Irish’ thought. Yeats uses the word “language” in its specialised use, as an observation of an artist who knows what ‘Nature’ actually means: a state of being in “the world.” The problem with such an “impulse” is that it also points to a broader objective beyond the artist’s desire for a dialect.

‘Nature’ represents an ongoing conflict in the establishment of a living speech. Yet, unlike beauty, on its own, it does not explain the necessity of the poetic vocation. Reflecting this, an understanding of human nature in Mahon’s poetry does not just imitate what is accepted or deemed ‘good’ in art. Rather, he broadens his oeuvre to include the problem of expression as the development of a style, as evident in “Biographia Literaria”: ‘Stowey to Göttingen, philosophy in a mist, / wide-eyed sublimities of ghost and Geist’ (33-34). The sublimity of his sources manages to be downplayed. Nonetheless, the material he employs as an aesthetic thrives on an understanding of vision that is not just carried by anyone. In a description of Baudrillard’s “simulacrum,” Ronald Schleifer says that, “it is difference that conveys meaning” (47). The image from modernist history recognises the importance of the agency of the lyrical voice. Pound’s efforts to emphasise the “moving” as opposed to
“fixed” image sought to free it from a semiotic tradition, and proposed instead new contexts for its use:

The defect of earlier imagist propaganda was not in misstatement but in incomplete statement. The diluters took the handiest and easiest meaning, and thought only of the STATIONARY image. If you can’t think of imagism or phanopoeia as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action.

I have taken to using the term phanopoeia to get away from irrelevant particular connotations tangled with a particular group of young people who were writing in 1912. (*ABC of Reading* 52)

Through the creation of the term “phanopoeia,” the reputation of the image became dependent on its various applications. Pound’s account of it above was how the image became a centre of modernist poetics: judging “what comes before or after” (*E&I* 526) as necessary to the consideration of dramatic speech.

Through Yeats’s ‘a written speech,’ the lyrical voice became an instrument of artists who believed, as he did, that “no beginnings are in the intellect” (*E&I* 20).

The first rule of Pound’s “Ideogrammic method” was that: “The mind lays hold only on particular things. It can NOT know an abstraction it has not itself made. Hence the fundamental scholastic principle, ‘Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses’ ” (Kenner, *Poetry of Ezra Pound* 76). The “fixed image” connotes an idea of taste that is arbitrary; yet, the promise of what Langer calls “musical” or “virtual time,” the “moving image” is potentially dangerous, without a stated mythology.

Yeats’s ‘written speech,’ in not being just a poetic aspiration, escaped the connotations of an image altogether, favouring instead the image of music as an attainment of personal eloquence. Blake’s ‘divine image’ was his creation of a ‘paradise’ without ‘Nature.’ However, “the taste in which Blake reasoned that because the sages had beards, all bearded men are sages” (24), as Bronowski describes it, left him without an image of that ‘paradise.’ Therefore, this seems to suggest the absence of an adequate and measured framework to the predicament of
taste in poetic theory. Both Pound and Yeats are key contributors in the modernist canon, each striving for an image of an “Earthly Paradise” (E&I 54). Nonetheless, Pound’s thesis of a “moving” image, as an agreement from within its poetic faculty, had a different source from Yeats; Pound had said that: “Dante’s ‘Paradiso’ is the most wonderful image” (ctd. in Gefin 9). Yeats did not allow such an escape from the responsibility of the poet’s own voice, while Mahon has negotiated through a distinctly verbal terrain in his poetic career. However, precisely as a result of the inadequacy of the image, Yeats makes it clear that the image of music is where the poet’s search for his antithetical self ends:

Since I was a boy I have always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his, for it is not natural to enjoy an art only when one is by oneself. Whenever one finds a fine verse one wants to read it to somebody, and it would be much less trouble and much pleasanter if we could all listen, friend by friend, lover by beloved. Images used to rise up before me, as I am sure they have arisen before nearly everybody else who cares for poetry, of wild-eyed men speaking harmoniously to murmuring wires while audience in many-coloured robes listened, hushed and excited. (E&I 14)

It is in the harmony or sympathy caused by music that the lyrical medium demonstrates images taken from mythology. More than a representation of an objective taste, “the image that draws her perpetually” is described in Yeats’s essay on William Morris as “the Star of the Magi, the Morning and Evening Star” (53).

As a result of his image of music, Yeats could say that: “As all effort has ceased, all thought has become image, because no thought could exist if it were not carried towards its own extinction, amid fear or in contemplation” (AV 136). For Mahon, however, there was no “chapel of the Star” (54). While Blake’s ‘divine image’ is an inspiration, Mahon practically summons it, adopting it in his poetry as an example of the ‘Nature’ Blake had rejected: ‘Down there, gleaming amid the porn and veg., / its rippling skin mutating by the minute, / a shivering dump with one faint star in it’ (“During the War” 46-48). The phrase ‘Down there’ points to his ‘pale star,’ a
motif that arguably originates from “Disused Shed in Co. Wexford.” Symbolic on the page, it earns the status of an image, and a context of interpretation for reading Mahon. I argue that, while the idealism of Blake encapsulates the modern feeling for both Yeats and Mahon, the limitations of an image as expressed through Pound’s imagism, are overcome only in Yeats. While interrogating the lyrical process, Mahon actually furthers the use of abstraction, and the potential of images in the modern lyric.
Mythologising the Formal Tradition

‘Literature’ explained the importance, but also dilemma, of poetic form in artists like Yeats. As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, Yeats had, as a result, explored the precise influences of a more dramatic language in relation to the creation of a verbal art. The art of recitation in Yeats’s work, or the belief in “formal eloquence,” introduced forms of speech that posed as exceptions to modern rhetoric which the ‘print’ medium made ubiquitous in the nineteenth century. Yet, it was ‘print’ that allowed the writer to reconsider his sources of expression. Away from such a context which made Yeats’s myths necessary in his art, however, for Mahon, ‘literature’ is simply ‘there’ as something already granted to the writer. In other words, without the myth of the ‘written,’ the poetic medium does not require a separate context for its interpretation. However, this was an important effect of modernity that the agenda of literary modernism had to overcome. It is a dimension necessary to reading modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Robert Frost for whom the consequences go beyond theme, and closer to style. However, the presence of a ‘written’ canon lacks the anxiety necessary for its formation in Mahon’s work, something that suggests the difficulty of contemporary art in relation to its engagement with the ‘canon.’

Devine highlights in Yeats, the Master of Sound that the ‘corporeal’ influence, particularly in relation to the poetic art of the nineteenth century, was the result of the formation of the lyrical voice – as well as its sources of sympathy. However, the ‘corporeal’ expression was elusive in Yeats, particularly in relation to the description of art that amidst the advent of mass printing that came about in the nineteenth century, a context that Devine appears to be unable to fully appreciate, in his account of Yeats’s later dramatic experiments as something **nouveau** rather than integral to
how we read the later Yeats: “was not his war against ‘body’ an impeding of this holistic flowering [of technique]”? The ‘body’ belongs to the very reason Devine feels to be central to the difficulty of Yeats’s work:

the prevalent trend of the Nineties for a stylistically attenuated, and orally muted, verse policed by the standards of Pater and a Symbolism promulgated by such as his friend, Arthur Symons, was a major negative factor, but another was the idea of the poet as a detached, uninvolved messenger of the muse.

As such, eloquence and beauty was a dialectic that Devine implies was finally unsustainable as a chosen vocation:

In Yeats’s poems the primary manifestation of ‘body’ is, of course, the insistent voices of Ireland’s oral tradition and their powerful effect on his own voice, and we can see that this aspect of ‘body’ eventually wins out over a less corporeal, or less orally aurally-based verse-style. Yet the general outlook was pessimistic enough. (75)

The problem of ‘body’ precisely lies in how Yeats was candid about the relations of aesthetic discourse to symbolic art, particularly in his prose.

The influence of the oral tradition in Yeats’s work had extended beyond the necessity of ‘body’ in terms of an existing poetic tradition, to embrace the lyric as an end product that was even not possible before. In this way, poets like Robert Frost had chosen to distance themselves from enjambment, in being only the “rhetorical form” of the poet’s aesthetic aspirations (Hoffman 131). Perhaps justly, Frost had feared the misuse of the device as a substitute for the demanding practice of versification. The poetic device of enjambment was sought only for the irresistible need to represent a physical or “corporeal” line. Therefore, its “rhetorical form” was treated as a belated tradition, in the way that print, much to Yeats’s dismay, became visually important to the reading of poetry. In this way, it meant that the aural dimension of poetry could be easily replaced by a stroke of fancy. Its structure of perception resorted to something visual, and Frost feared the influence of its illusion while Yeats embraced it as the
very evidence of his aesthetic as articulated in Vision, which is “to hold in a single thought reality and justice” (AV 25).

Yeats’s main prejudice against the ‘body,’ as Devine suggests, was how any poet, then, could use aesthetic discourse as a means to insert objectivity into his poetics. Likewise, for Frost, the idea of “enjambment” appears to allow poets to place a claim on their medium, and thus removing the distinction between good and amateur poets: “In a letter to a friend he cannot resist ridiculing enjambment as a main principle of measurement, wondering how a poet would know how ‘to cut lines unhocuspously’ without the baseline of meter” (Hoffman 123). Frost responded to the danger of an aesthetic that warred against his “imagination of the ear,” albeit by acknowledging its ubiquitous guide for modern poetry.

Frost addressed the potential misappropriation of lyrical reality by displacing the line as the unit of lyrical experience in favour of the sentence. In another letter, written to Sidney Cox in 1915, we discover what was Frost’s ‘more’ personal construction: “The sentence is everything—the sentence well-imagined” (qtd. in Hoffman 122). The importance of the line firstly lies with a visual expression, and furthermore, the technique it involves suggests how it becomes important in relation to an individual writer’s style. “Mahon,” as Norman Vance says, “like Yeats, was able, was indeed obliged, to stand at the end of a certain kind of history and engage in, or, more precisely, with, decadent poetic meditation . . .” (570). Mahon had an already existing image – of ‘the verse hard-wired’ (“The Cloud Ceiling” 52), the manifestation of his pronounced use of punctuation which brings attention to itself. Not dissimilar to Mahon’s method, Frost’s “the sentence well-imagined” has a further ambition of recreating a lost art. Its form was always going to need a subject, because it influenced everything surrounding it. A poem need not be read in a linear fashion,
but it is precisely where such a direction is imposed that attention is brought to the poem as its own subject. Hoffman says that: “Rather than simply attending to ‘the sentence within the poem,’ then, Frost’s poetry attests to the fact that his division of those sentences into lines gathers figurative force.” Where the form of a ‘poem’ is concerned, the ‘sentence’ is discovered like a forgotten thing occurring within the poetry as an expression of what the lines could mean when translated into prose.

The ‘line’ inevitably demands attention that has to do with generic convention while it is in the prosaic ‘sentence’ that therefore appears to be more freedom in terms of a poetic subject. In this way, a ‘sentence’ opens a way for the poem to be self-sufficient in relation to a subject found in an image that aspires to a different formal awareness of modern poetry. In fact, the presence of such a subject gives the poet a definite personality – an ideal one that reveals the meaning of a poem, as the assurance of its ultimate significance. Therefore, for Yeats, the opportunity afforded in modern poetry is for form to be turned into the source of the poem’s subject. In comparison, what Hoffman calls “the politics of the visual line” (131) emphasises the withdrawal from all poetic discourse that Frost hoped to achieve – but also as a statement of his aural art.

Mahon significantly stresses how his lyrics are bound to some unspoken rule: the lack of distinction between his translated and original work a way of dealing with the formal likeness between poems. In relation to Frost, Donoghue admires how the creator of “an aesthetic of ‘sentence sounds’” was “remarkably alive to the pressure of those motives that try to force themselves up and out into the free air of expression, and often fail” (OE 99). However, Frost also held a strong belief in the presence of a real subject, and therefore was conscious of the possibility of failure. Therefore, instead of a form for his ideal expression, the only solution for the lyrical memory
was Frost’s extra-literary resistance to the tide of modernity, albeit without resolving, as Hoffman indicates, the problem of the visualisation of the ‘line.’ Alternatively, Mahon grants versions of that resistance as a theme in his poetry.

If Mahon’s work stands out visually, the aural dimensions of his work nevertheless remain important. Frost had tried to preserve its concept through his poetics, threatened as it was in the world of contemporary poetry. Yeats, however, offers a way to think about how history was an opportunity for the ‘well-made’ poem, contributing as it did a real dialogue with the forces of Romantic history. For Yeats, a lesson he learns from Blake is that there was to be no progression without the appearance, at least, of contraries.

When done with some sensitivity, the advent of free verse offered poets an opportunity to expand the existing poetic discourse, and therefore invite new material for their respective art. Helen Vendler, in “Metrical Variation in Yeats’s Verse,” claims that in Yeats’s later work, “[t]he line is replaced by the stanza as the main unit of construction” (Yeats Annual 37). For this reason, however, she is hard-pressed to place him in any tradition at all: “The historian of Yeats’s style will also want to speculate on the spiritual meaning certain practices of rhyme and metre and stanza form acquired for him over his lifetime” (19). The ‘line’ embodies the very interests of the poet, even without any sign of its impending fulfilment. Instead, the unity of the stanza form contains all the elements that make up a line as an aural reality, resulting in the “spiritual meaning” Vendler alludes to. Rather than a ‘mere’ convention, the stanza now refers readers to a distinctive pattern of imagery residing in the poetry. It unexpectedly stands for a semantic context that resists the manner in which words in a poem may simply be read aloud, and therefore only meant to be heard. In this way, the trope of the ‘musical’ line had to undergo revisions in terms of
its underlying assumptions in MacDonagh’s conception of it in relation to the “Irish Mode.” Unlike “enjambment” which could be a mere copy of nature, at least as Frost had feared, the stanza which I have examined to some degree in relation to the poets is naturally built to be more sensitive but also resistant to new subjects.

Consciously driven as the character and subject of Yeats’s prose plays, Irish poetry is displayed as occurring in different permutations over time – each as thematically symbolic as the next. It is this particular tradition that Mahon continues in, producing new sites of lyrical expectation to rediscover the ideal of a poetic or visionary genius amidst what he also acknowledges as an age of postmodern kitsch. Pound, who sought the ‘musical phrase’ instead of the sentence as his ideal form of feeling, said that: for the “preservation of art” one must be prepared for a “providential blindness or deafness” which is an opportunity for “a compensating sensitiveness or hyper-sensitiveness” where one can then find ourselves “absorbed in the art” (qtd. in Schafer 48).

Unlike Frost, Pound had feared that the preservation of the metrical form could hinder a poet from progressing in his craft; but in place of craft, was a “compensating sensitiveness or hyper-sensitiveness” resulting in a more elevated form of expression. As Yeats shows us, precisely through his suspicion of “externalities of all kinds” (E&I 155), that the real import of formal invention evinces the potential of poets to be tastemakers rather than mere imitators of the genre. Yeats continually stresses the ‘discord’ or conflict of the poetic image – out of which he engaged with Frost’s poetics of the ‘line,’ showing how it was the opportunity offered by modern poetry to reinvent the genre.

Mahon shows how his art stands up against events of ‘history’ that are frequently projected as the chaos that is mirrored in his poems. In this way, several of
Mahon’s collections represented a form of knowledge belonging to an aesthetic that could be both Irish, as well as part of a ‘global village.’ Yet, an Irish literary history, as Yeats shows, also implies a reflection of real events, which a poem like “Easter, 1916” demonstrates. The poem frames the potential of more of such events to come. Yet, it is not a projection of Yeats’s political point of view because he also refers to the precise form it takes, a form of mythology that he developed in his art. Such a poem does not wait or pause for discursive approval or treatment. Through Yeats, we see how the myth of Irish art, far from being only a source of inspiration, became a place of real action for the poet: “Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation” (E&I 195; emphasis added). While Mahon argues, like many major Irish writers, that the pursuit of art characterises the ‘poetic’ ambition, Yeats’s later work demonstrates that this happens as the establishment of lyrical agency in the first place. He understood and valued the vision of a living artist, and even lived in it, through an awareness of a dialectical history belonging to art. The continuing influence of Yeats’s ‘mask,’ then, is in how it was a genuine reflection of the poet’s ability to resist a pressing political reality, through his lyrics. I have discussed the difficulty in terms of the alternative personality it presents to contemporary poetry. The poems I have considered suggest that its complexity is precisely due to the importance of its symbolism to artists like Mahon; a consciousness of an undefeatable opponent that may simply be the discovery – of ‘life.’
CONCLUSION

Yeats’s emphasis on the ‘practical arts’ was an attempt to remove the poet from his native soil, through an escape from the personality that Eliot had shown was finally difficult to define. The fear, that makes the poems that have been read memorable, is how personality may intrude into an artist’s work, whereas what an artist’s work connotes is something altogether different. In this way, Eliot had concluded with an observation that only those with personality could know what it means to escape it. This grappling with personality was what it meant for a poet to be truly ‘modern.’ For Mahon, personality is more directly a conflict that arises in relation to the symbolism of art. In this way, lyrical art is achieved through the suggestion that a poet lacks a ‘natural’ medium for the representation of feeling. The trope of a poem is something that the aesthetic themes explored in Mahon’s work promote but also deem necessary for an authentic engagement with the other arts. As such, he takes on different roles, including that of a translator of plays. However, the prodigious purpose that he shares with Yeats’s understanding of the ‘theatre,’ is limited to the genre, rather than inclusive of the personality its medium evoked in the latter’s later lyrics, as Mahon’s treatment of ‘Byzantium’ for example has shown.

Mahon intentionally cultivates the ambiguity of the role of myth in relation to the vocation a poet ultimately embodies – that of an author of a ‘body’ of work. For instance, “The Seaside Cemetery” particularly shows the influence of Symbolist poets like Paul Valéry. For Mahon, such a personality, then, is only possible as an exile from his medium, and country. However, the poet as exile did not firstly embody a discursive role, for Yeats at least, in the way it appears to be for Mahon, in relation to the Northern Irish ‘canon.’ Indeed, Yeats was more than an Irish writer, for he made
his personality a quest for a purer form of aestheticism, as a consequence of his creation of a ‘mask’ in his work. Thus, his ideal medium acknowledged the necessary autonomy of art for a truly aesthetic view of the world that was represented by “some reality, some beauty.” His definition of literary form needed the cultic status of his ‘great memory,’ through which an understanding of the symbolism of the artistic medium became central to his work.

The objective of an Irish poetics for these poets is made apparent, even as it critiques the myth of an ‘Irishness’ in their respective work, as well as the role of the sublime in poetic memory and tradition. I have suggested, in the last chapter, that Mahon is perhaps ironically more conscious of the status of an Irish writer than Yeats was in his own lifetime. The latter instead sought the Irish tradition as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. As it happened, such an understanding of tradition positioned him advantageously, to order the Irish literary imagination for his audience. In particular, I have considered how Yeats’s invention of dramatic speech and Mahon’s interest in the autonomy of the lyric are each based on a mythical understanding of the poetic medium. The abstractions of poetry have been unmasked, albeit in different ways for Yeats and Mahon. Like how Yeats’s “arbitrary, harsh, difficult symbolism” (AV 23) reconceptualised the ‘lyric’ for a modern audience, what typified the modernist tide for him was the discovery of myth. The commanding style of his later work suggests the presence of a new medium, whose form commits “Coole Park” to its theme: ‘The intellectual sweetness of those lines / That cut through time or cross it withershins’ (23-24). Yeats had exposed a literary culture that had always presupposed its existence in the Irish community, explaining the importance and enigma of ‘automatic writing’ for both him and Mahon. This theme has been studied in relation to the capacity of the ‘lyric’ as a context that generates the myth of
‘Nature’ or a post-romantic sublime. Instead of a device of rhetoric, ‘Nature,’ signifies a medium of poetic invention that may not be underestimated in terms of its power or force.

“Popular poetry” was an idiom that Yeats used to describe the ideal medium that he foresaw for Irish art: “strange and obscure, and unreal to all who have not understanding” (E&I 8). The object of Yeats’s ‘new poetics’ occurred because he had sought to bring together two ideal allegiances, found in realism and symbolism respectively, or as Stead suggests in The New Poetic, “the popular and the esoteric” (18). The dramatic style Yeats had worn, which has been discussed to some extent in this dissertation, is a source of imitation in Mahon’s work, giving new understanding to the importance of mysticism in an otherwise incompatible world of fact. Yet, precisely for this reason, what Mahon refuses to give up is the notion of symbolism, and therefore, we might read him as another character on Yeats’s conscience: “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat” (CW5 12). As both poets show us, it is difficult to maintain the formal commitment of the ‘lyric’ without a narrative of its own, which meant that, for Mahon, its vision had to be practical rather than enigmatic:

I shall walk the Dublin lanes as the days grow shorter,
I who once had a poem in The New Yorker,
and spend old age, if any, in an old mac
with the young audibly sneering behind my back,
deafened by gulls and the heart-breaking cries
of children — ourselves, once — by perilous seas
where nightingale never yet dared raise its voice. (“Imbolc: JBY” 17-23)

Despite the context, the fate of poetry is devoid of irony, for Mahon is secretly harbouring a nostalgia for the past in this collection, a past that notably involves a previously written poem. The rhymes are evident where they appear and where they are missed, and the rhythm that is produced as a result squeezes out a narrative.
Indeed, the poem forecloses the missing rhyming words, as the lines seem to tail off amidst ‘perilous seas’ – leading to, quite literally, ‘its voice.’

Each line has a stark precision about it, a place ‘where nightingale never yet dared raise its voice.’ It is there that an entire tradition was built – as something belonging to the ‘voice’ of the poem; and Mahon, through the image of the ‘nightingale,’ suggests it quite literally. As seen in Chapter Four, Mahon’s work forces us to recognise, and even subscribe to the mysticism of MacDonagh’s ‘Irish Mode.’ The attention that the ‘line’ gets in The Hudson Letter may well suggest how the collection reflects a period in history that is referred to, by Robert Welch for instance, as “the rise of Irish poetry in English.” For future generations of poets, the nineteenth century in particular represented an age of nationalistic verse. The threat to such a world remains till this day the fear of, as Welch puts it, “the kind of emotional simplicity which turns poetry into rhetoric” (12-13). For this reason, Mahon’s ‘nightingale’ not only represents the country of the imagination, but its nostalgic world.

The revival of Irish poetry written in the nineteenth century reflected new directions for poetry, but it also shows us the importance of myth to the continuing efficacy of ‘Irish’ form in relation to the study of beauty. In this way, Yeats continues to be an important pioneering influence in Irish poetics, and if the nineteenth century continues to be important to both poets, it was not actually due to a particular style begun there, but rather, as we have seen, the recognition of the necessity of ‘style’ adopted by those who continue to abide by a belief in an ‘Irish’ poetry, where its chosen vernacular continues to be central to its creative imagination.

The endeavour to understand what Langer calls “poetic creation” or a structure of poesis is very much alive in poets who continue to be interested in the continuance
of a genuine lyrical feeling. If a rather bleak future, Yeats argues, in “A People’s Theatre,” that standing at the brink of it has its natural advantages for the artist:

We stand on the margin between wilderness and wilderness, that which we observe through our senses and that which we can experience only, and our art is always the description of one or the other. If our art is mainly from experience we have need of learned speech, or agreed symbols, because all those things whose names renew experience have accompanied that experience already many times. (Yeats, Selected Criticism 186-87)

That which is “between wilderness and wilderness” is the ideal setting to concern ourselves with ‘art and reality,’ more intimately connected than we might like them to be, as Mahon has argued. Through the ‘lyric,’ or what he means by “learned speech,” Yeats’s literary revival had the unrivalled benefit of being an important moment in modern history, which I have endeavoured to define in the chapters as being in opposition to the idea of “experience” in terms of poetic representation. In contrast to the interpretation of ‘history’ as “experience,” the ‘Great Wheel’ in Vision discards what has been described as the “agreed symbols” in poetry.

Maud Bodkin remarks that: “poetry is there for realisation, when imagination, awakening, escapes the inhibitions of familiarity and the practical life” (325f; emphasis mine). However, in the main text, Bodkin claims, more controversially, that: “One should perhaps note, in qualification [. . . ], that truth once imaginatively realised may be shorn of its poetic glory when it has become a familiar object of practical assent and endeavour” (325; emphasis mine). Throughout the dissertation, I have argued, via Langer, of the importance of the “articulate symbol” that appears to equivalent to the eloquence of lyrical music. Yet, where ‘musical’ eloquence is concerned in our poets, whether as a “realisation” or what becomes “realised,” we find ourselves in a “wilderness” of feeling. It is from this dilemma of art and reality – that is, of being “between wilderness and wilderness” – that the modern poet must somehow find his own style.
As I have demonstrated, beauty shows that there is no separation between Yeats’s ‘image’ and ‘mask.’ In this way, it represents a medium that escapes unconscious for an “awakening” of an imagination contained in his symbols, belonging to a lost “poetic glory.” Yeats says in a late poem, “Sweet Dancer,” that:

If strange men come from the house
To lead her away do not say
That she is happy being crazy;
Lead them gently astray;
Let her finish her dance,
Let her finish her dance.
Ah dancer, ah sweet dancer! (8-14)

Yeats allows his lines, quite literally, to be laden with the emotion of a chant: what was the subject matter of his earlier work now represents how it has become part of the revelation of Yeats’s new style, whose discovery the title of the poem suggests. The development of a prose subject is arguably the greatest achievement of Yeats’s lyrics. To appreciate such a subject, one discovers ‘writing’ as a mode of feeling – an individual ‘soul’ reaching for the limits of what ‘a written speech’ signifies. There can be no “realisation” without a medium that intimates not just the prophetic, but the more pragmatic side of the mythic imagination.

As an actual process undergone, the lyrical object is a gift of consciousness, for which there is only one goal: to protect its ideas from the decay of time. However, the focus of this dissertation has not called for closer examination of Yeats’s metrical forms, which could possibly enrich an understanding of the action of transposing a prose subject into verse. Mahon’s own approach to eloquence results in his conclusion about Yeats’s art as the ‘poetry of life’ whose mythology may explain a consistent style or pattern within Irish lyrical art beyond the poets.

I argue that Yeats’s legacy is remarkable and even unable to be rivalled – as a structure or mode of the modern lyric, which gains our attention partly through the
controversy of an ‘Irish literary revival.’ Mahon’s work carries on its tradition through an understanding of its dialectical force. These lines from Mahon’s “Art and Reality,” therefore, undermine but also emphasise the notion of the ‘Irish’ influence:

We flinch, of course, when someone writes
our story by his different lights;
yet what I say agrees, I know,
with your self-estimate. We two
both wanted to help dissipate
the ‘guilt and infantile self-hate,’
each in his way, and find a voice
for the strange place bequeathed to us. (65-72)

That ‘strange place bequeathed to us’ belongs to Irish history; precisely because of Mahon’s belief that there is no commentary more pertinent than that regarding the role of form in art, his interest in his Irish heritage is very much alive despite his aversion to its political manifestations. The myth of ‘Irish’ form is evident even today: ‘when someone writes,’ even though the poem also suggests that one may never get close enough to its true import, told as it is to us second-hand.

Yeats, the writer of his own ‘autobiography,’ proves to us that there is no form of consciousness more elevated or sublime, than a poet’s: “The dramatist must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind, as the musician pictures her in sound and the sculptor in form” (CW8 60-61). This dramatic life that belonged to his prose, as we have seen, is a key subject in his essays; indeed, it is particularly evident in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” where he acts as a mediator between art and reality: “In A Defence of Poetry, [Shelley] will have it that the poet and the lawgiver hold their station by the right of the same faculty, the one uttering in words and the other in the forms of society his vision of the divine order, the Intellectual Beauty” (E&I 67). Just like the difference between “the poet and the lawgiver,” what one has to finally judge is Mahon’s version of antitheticality against Yeats’s ‘anti-mask’ which became that elusive “beryl stone [. . . ] enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the
pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window” (*E&I* 163). The genius of Yeats who forged its feeling in modern verse must not be underestimated. Pound, by requiring his verbal pictures, lost out in terms of a system belonging to an oral tradition which Yeats continued to be connected to: whether Celtic, Gaelic, or Irish, as material for the imagination, while Mahon’s work suggests that the role of ‘a written speech’ ultimately goes beyond even such pretexts for the imagination.

My main point of interest that leads us back to the Introduction is: what makes tradition a “divine order” which, for Yeats at least, is irreconcilable with history as memory – and that is, thus, necessary to the individuality of ‘modern’ art. The danger posed by modernity for Yeats was in its abandonment of “moods or tones of feeling” (*OE* 43), but the conflict for a poet like Mahon is precisely in the manner in which he might align himself with that tradition. As such, the realisation for Mahon is that “all conflict” belongs to the poet’s decision to distance himself from any binding context apart from their work. For this reason, however, Mahon’s application of the theme of ‘home’ ubiquitous in Northern Irish poetry takes one or two cues from the tradition of Yeatsian mysticism; present in symbols that have found their way into the very context of Mahon’s poetic landscape: ‘December night; night vision; a slash of hail’ (‘During the War” 41). In summary, Yeats’s work argues that the continuing importance of the lyrical subject as an illustration of ‘modern history’ is perhaps the poet’s most groundbreaking conception – and whose theme Mahon illustrates inevitably revolves around the figure and mask of Yeats.

In a way, Yeats appears to subscribe to a more conventional understanding of poetic history than Mahon does, which the following lines summarise perfectly:

‘Great hatred, little room / Maimed us at the start’ (Yeats, “Remorse for Intemperate
Speech’’ 12-13). Precisely through the role that limits a post-romantic poet to his felt history that a naive tradition of the ‘lyric’ is uncovered, which is unlikely to be repeated – both in terms of ambition, as well as influence. Therefore, while Mahon’s work treats the artist as an exile from Irish history, Yeats demonstrates how a ‘real’ fin de siècle may be beyond representation.

Beauty finally involves a form of feeling that suggests that ‘art’ is no longer about ‘life,’ or at least the artistic life that is treated as a myth: “a vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern, the wheel where the world is butterfly. We need no protection but it does, for if we become interested in ourselves, in our own lives, we pass out of the vision” (CW5 15; emphasis added). What Yeats had sought to represent as an entire oral tradition through ‘a written speech’ meant that a particular understanding of poetry had to be accommodated – if not also transformed into the ideal ‘lyric.’ The difference for Mahon is that he dwells on how such a destination can never be reached as a vision of ‘reality’ in a concrete sense.

The forms of the lyric are carefully studied in Yeats’s later work, as belonging to a symbol of art that explores the possibilities of a medium that goes beyond a particular genre. The presence of a genuine context for the examination of the poetic or aesthetic quality of the ‘lyric’ in Yeats’s later work, as Mahon notes in “Christmas at Kinsale,” was emphasised through his ‘Byzantium.’ However, there is also for him the continuing search for something even more specific than a symbol of art – found in a ‘musical’ theme necessary to the imagination of his work, and its abiding concern with art. He appears to have found this theme instead with Yeats’s ‘lapis lazuli,’ and its ‘tragic music.’ In short, I argue that Mahon’s work is ‘conventionally’ aware that the primary limitation of the medium of a lyrical artist is due to the presence of the poetic ‘self.’ For this reason, the sign of an artist’s creativity has to do with the
meaning he adopts, in terms of the genre of ‘poetry.’ Indeed, Mahon implicitly addresses the entire contemporary canon as ‘the still living whole’ (AAW 21). Its identification remains largely generic as an indication of the poet’s aesthetic bent. However, Yeats also insists in his prose that it is not just its conventions that define the poetic genre but a transformed understanding of the role of ‘tradition’ in relation to the making of art. Therefore, by holding different interpretations of the function of the poet, Yeats and Mahon each emphasises the presence of a poetic tradition which, particularly where it is mythical in its origins, their respective engagements with it suggests a future for Irish art.
Future Applications

This dissertation encourages further study on Yeats’s role in the creation of an ‘Anglo-Irish’ Renaissance, in relation to the influence of the Irish bardic tradition in history – in its connection to the mythical trope of ‘Nature,’ which has been argued to be instrumental to his later poetics. The relationship between Yeats’s early and later work might be developed in greater depth, and in particular, the differences in terms of the representation of nature, between his early poems and his later experiments in terms of the ambiguity of beauty and the medium of thought it offers.

I could envisage working on an article outlining the influence of Yeats on the contemporary Irish lyric, including the consideration of Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Medbh McGuckian and Michael Longley. The connections evoked by the notion of a ‘Renaissance’ is a mythology surrounding Yeats which may be further explored by expanding this circle of influence to other Irish poets of Mahon’s standing. Moreover, this could form a basis for a more complete discussion of Mahon’s work as a contemporary Irish poet, mapping strands of significance found in the notions of homelessness and exile, in relation to the role of the artist and the poetic medium in the representation of life. This will include an extensive study of his New Collected Poems that imagines a new context, even structure, for reading both his early and later work.

In relation to the manifestation of ‘Anglo-Irish’ art as a sign of the more global influence of its poetry, an understanding of its ‘Renaissance’ could lead to a further appreciation of the importance of the nineteenth-century to Irish poets and thinkers alike that foreshadowed and even shaped the literary modernism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this regard, I can see the potential of studying Yeats and Mahon in relation to their respective treatments of artistic influence, for it
indeed continues to be provocative in the field of poetics. The influences brought on by an Irish poetic tradition may be identified in relation to the specific phenomenon that is now found in Northern Irish poetry, which in turn emphasises that it shares with an Anglo-Irish’ verse tradition the belief that an Irish literary history is usually associated with specific events that take place in its regard. What is important, then, is further research into Mahon’s unique connection to Northern Irish poetry. In other words, I propose an article tracing a mythical narrative of ‘Irish’ form that is based on aesthetic events that emerge from political ones, which Yeats was evidently a precursor of. It is a narrative which is in some ways only ‘Irish’ in its mood because of the priority placed on its ‘form’ historically. As such, poets like Mahon further the possibility of a true ‘Irish’ community precisely by foregrounding its political treatment in most circles.

I have argued how the ‘Romantic’ influences in Yeats’s work lead to a greater understanding of his own influence as developed in his later work. The connections between the later Yeats and Blake that grew more and more an inspiration for him is a study on its own, as well as his attraction to Swedenborg, his ‘ideal subject’ in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in an essay whose style has been considered to be similar to that of A Vision. Therefore, an article on Yeats’s chosen reading material could deepen existing work on the impact of Romantic history – through the dialectic of nature and beauty.

The liberal tendencies of the poets’s respective understanding of the lyric could be further explored to suggest certain common causes or reasons – whether cultural or philosophical. What any study on nature poetry requires is an examination of trends across artists where ‘nature’ is privileged as a mode of understanding the world. My thesis has eschewed placing Yeats together with Mahon simply on account
of the influence of nature poetry traditionally in Irish literature. Nonetheless, in order to emphasise the ‘lyric’ as the source of an innate form of knowledge, an interest in relation to its application within nature studies is necessary and even expedient. A study of the origins of nature poetry in the Irish tradition could explain the centrality of the psychological aspects of Irish (and Yeatsian) art, which includes the reinterpretation of the subject of ‘Nature’ that benefits from other structures or modes of feeling. Furthermore, the dichotomy of country and city has not found its way into the present thesis. Nonetheless, it is deserving of study for the possible connotations of the rural theme in Irish art that seem to be able to transcend its historical context, such that these lyrical scenes could find its way to middle-class audiences living in the city – for instance, through the Abbey Theatre. Thus, the importance of the city in relation to a more dramatic art could be traced to writers who might be compared in this way to Yeats or Mahon. Where discovery of ‘form,’ and its successful representation, forms the central concern for poets, the subject matter of their work attracts comparative studies, both with Irish writers and beyond.

I have suggested that the key to the development of a modernist poetics is through an understanding of poetic tradition that survives the inevitability of history. For this reason, the role of American modernism in Yeats and Mahon respectively may be further examined in terms of the resonances of its poetic myths, which have been briefly introduced in the chapters. The connections in the poetics of Yeats, Pound and Mahon, in relation to an understanding of the modern literary imagination and a ‘musical’ canon, have been suggested in the thesis. Likewise, reading Eliot in relation to the description of the more dramatic medium of verse offers further proof of the necessity of rewriting the history of the ‘written’ tradition of Yeats’s altogether ideal canon, which Eliot’s *The Waste Land* had epitomised.
The above poets elaborate for readers an important subject in modernist prose, where a ‘musical’ medium belonging to an ideal lyric might be taken to be an ambition rather than a given capacity of its artistic form. Its subject therefore exists, in a way that could deepen an understanding of Yeats’s “personality as a whole,” in relation to an aesthetic of the ‘lyric.’ Thus, what a comparison between Yeats and Mahon achieves is to highlight an examination of the influence of ‘music’ that could suggest Yeats’s importance in the study of modernist art, which has been more frequently discussed in relation to Pound. Likewise, the importance of reading Mahon in a comparative study with Pound is evident, and has not so far been ventured.
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