

Derek Mahon – A World Without Monsters?

An early poem of Mahon's, *Glengormley*, despite some obvious ironies, is an attempt to take a largely optimistic view of the world. Human beings are seen as capable of meaningful life albeit in their narrow domesticities:

Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man
Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
And grasped the principle of the watering can.

Technology and science have spread themselves wide, and cast out some superstitions and horrors:

Now we are safe from monsters, and the giants
Who tore up sods twelve miles by six
And hurled them out to sea to become islands
Can worry us no more.

There remains a slightly unrealistic sense of threats we continue to face:

Only words hurt us now

but we seem to be in a world where things are mostly manageable, and this, if it is true, is good:

I should rather praise
A worldly time under this worldly sky –
The terrier-taming, garden-watering days

Mahon's praise of 'a worldly time' brings to mind a poet who is close to Mahon, Louis MacNeice. Famously, MacNeice advised a poet to read the newspapers and be informed in economics and

politics, as well as appreciative of women. Mahon writes a tribute to MacNiece, *In Carrowdore Churchyard*. There he talks of the churchyard's 'humane perspective' and 'humane' might also seem a good word for Mahon's intended outlook. The 'humanist' rejects superstition (the monsters), appreciates technology and believes in the possibility of goodness. Mahon, as a humanist, praises what he sees as MacNiece's fundamental optimism, a pleasure in life that presumably overbalances what is known to be awful:

So,
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.

But even the most optimistic person is aware of what is awful, especially so if he is informed in politics and economics. There is injustice and poverty and then there are the wider issues of loneliness, suffering and, ultimately, death. It is obviously not true, and Mahon knows this, that 'only words hurt us now'. But one can take at least two attitudes to this. One might prefer the pessimism of a James Thomson¹, or perhaps an R.S.Thomas, or one might, with Macneice, and Mahon apparently, try to remain positive.

¹ Notably his *The City of Dreadful Night*

Presumably a reader of newspapers, Mahon is obviously aware of social failings and in *One of These Nights*, hints they might become very serious:

A breeze-ruffled news-stand
Headlines the dole queues,
The bleak no-longer news
Of racism and inflation –
Straws in the rising wind
That heralds the cyclone.

This fear of ‘the cyclone’ sits uneasily with too much cheerfulness. Perhaps this is because Mahon is able to set against this fear the beauty of a single night:

Enchanted foliage, bright
Water as in an old film
In sumptuous black and white
- This is the true realm,
The real earth before
Business and empire;
And life begins tonight.

One wonders how far Mahon buys into this. Or is it merely wishful thinking that only words hurt us now, or that a single beautiful night is ‘the real earth’?

Elsewhere, he hints at this almost detached sense of well-being in the sublimity of the rustic French woman in *Breton Walks*, out on

a cold, beautiful day ('No doubt the creation was something like this') and yet being largely unmoved:

She has seen perhaps
Ten thousand dawns like this, and is not impressed

In *A Refusal to Mourn*, he tries to elaborate his frail stoicism into something of a philosophy. He picks out a single man, who had worked in the shipyards, been married and had six children, but who now lives in isolation, his wife dead. In due course, he too will die and Mahon is intensely struck by the fact that all trace of him will disappear:

In time the astringent rain
Of those parts will clean
The words from his gravestone

Indeed, not only all trace of this man will be gone, but every trace of all men:

And his boilers lie like tombs
In the mud of the sea bed
'Till the next Ice Age comes
And the earth he inherited
Is gone like Neanderthal Man
And no records remain.

So Mahon confronts what might be seen as the ultimate issue that confronts even the most successful civilisation, that is a problem even for the terrier-taming classes in their comfortable

homes. What can be said to it? One suspects that very little can be said, perhaps even nothing. Perhaps, like the Breton woman, one should not be impressed, even by this. Mahon however, is not able to be entirely silent here and seems to hint at something more:

But the secret bred in the bone
On the dawn strand survives
In other times and lives,
Persisting for the unborn
Like a claw-print in concrete
After the bird has flown.

But quite what 'the secret' is we do not know, for perhaps it is secret. Is what survives that which passes from one generation to another? After all, this man had children. But in time, of course, every child of every child will be gone, and there will be nothing. There may of course be a claw-print, somewhere, in concrete, after the bird has flown. But this too will fade.

Mahon is very interested in the passage of time and perhaps his most beautiful response to this is *J.P. Donleavy's Dublin*:

For the days are long –
From the first milk van
To the last shout in the night,
An eternity. But the weeks go by
Like birds; and the years, the years

Fly past anti-clockwise
Like clock hands in a bar mirror.

This is not, of course, the view of someone entirely resigned to the disadvantages of mortal existence. It is hard, here, to avoid a note of deep – if pointless - regret, particularly the sense of the eternity of the days, albeit spent with the terrier and watering the hedge.

In his best-known poem, *A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*, Mahon sets down a background of deep time, placing human endeavour, for all its worldliness, in a vast perspective where it arguably seems to shrink to nothing. He imagines a clutter of foetid mushrooms growing in a shed abandoned for fifty years, and sees in them an image of lost people down the ages:

Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,
'Let the god not abandon us
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain'

This is a powerful image, with its explicit reference to the Holocaust seeming to take it out of Mahon's normal range of reference. It reminds us perhaps that we are not ever safe from monsters.

He returns to this theme of abandonment in *A Garage in Co. Cork*, but here the note is less ambitious, and there is again acceptance

of the lives lived in this place, of the value of their being merely human:

We might be anywhere but are in one place only,
One of the milestones of earth-residence
Unique in each particular, the thinly
Peopled hinterland serenely tense -
Not in the hope of a resplendent future
But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature

One feels that this is the note that Mahon prefers to strike.

But as with an anxious man, one is never far from concern. In *North Wind: Portrush*, there is again a sense of trouble somewhere. 'On this benighted coast' the wind is high and fearful

Like the high keen of a lost
Lear-spirit in agony
Condemned for eternity.

And suddenly there is the sense of monsters abroad again, that some lives may perhaps be irredeemably unhappy. And yet, as Mahon again tries to steer towards his even keel, in Portrush, apparently, despite the Lear-like wind, 'And the existential, stark/Face of the cosmic dark.', life goes on:

But the shops open at nine
As they have always done,

The wrapped up bourgeoisie
Hardened by wind and sea.
The newspapers are late
But the milk shines in its crate

Are we best to think of Mahon's outlook in terms of milk-tops
shining in a Lear-like wind?

Technically, one is struck by Mahon's adherence to often strict, rhyming forms, something that he perhaps derives from two poets by which he is clearly influenced, MacNeice and Auden, and which is much less common among his contemporaries. This has often invited critical comment, *The Poetry Foundation* noting, 'Some critics faulted Mahon for his tightly controlled poetry, suggesting that his adherence to a highly structured verse form diminishes the power of his words.'. But it is easy to see this adherence to tight form as part of his wider outlook, his desire for order in what he suspects might be a wider chaos. Sean O'Brien has perceptively noted the 'intensified monochrome' of Mahon's poetry, its lack of a wide range of colours. Certainly, Mahon seems to want to set against any sense he has of what is terrible in the world a largely reassuring voice. He seems convinced there remain no monsters, and while we spot glimpses of them at various points in his poetry, they remain carefully caged by even words.