

Derek Mahon's Take on Italy

Irene De Angelis
(Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia)

Abstract Derek Mahon's writings inspired by Italy date back to the Autumn of 1998, when he spent four months in Rome, which was his base for visits to Naples, Pompei and Sorrento. The *Collected Poems* (1999) include "Roman Script" and other poems connected to Italian culture, such as "High Water" about Venice, as well as a series of translations and adaptations drawn from sources ranging as widely as Michelangelo's sonnets and Ariosto, to Umberto Saba and Pier Paolo Pasolini. This essay explores the background of these poems, including references to his relatively unknown *Adaptations* (2006). I intend to show that Mahon's view of Italy is also shaped by his deep knowledge of the great Latin classics, from Ovid and Juvenal, to Propertius and Horace, and that his wide-ranging cosmopolitan insights enrich his and his reader's ways of looking at the world at large.

Keywords Derek Mahon. Italy. Rome. Pasolini. *Adaptations*.

Derek Mahon spent four months in Rome in the autumn of 1998 when he was in his late fifties. He also visited Venice and made an excursion from Rome to Pompei. We have evidence of this in his important poem "Roman Script" and two shorter ones, "High Tide" (about Venice) and "Ghosts" (sparked off in Sorrento, on the return journey from Pompei). Cerveteri and Fiesole both appear in "Quaderno" (2008, 20). His previous travels had included Dublin, where he took his degree at the Trinity College (an Anglican foundation), Paris, the U.S. (twice, for about two and five years) and England (in both London and the provinces).

Mahon was born in Belfast, where both his father and grandfather were skilled workers in the shipyards. The family was Protestant. So he did not go to Rome as a devout Catholic pilgrim or a devotee of Winkelmann, such as so many English intellectuals. He went there as a well-established poet, translator and literary critic, with a good knowledge of Rome from music (Cecilia, patroness of music is the only saint mentioned in "Roman Script", without her 'title'), art, literature and the cinema. "Roman Script" begins and ends with the same line from Pasolini's long poem "Gramsci's Ashes" – in Italian in the epigraph, in Mahon's English translation in the last line of the last stanza (11) of the main poem (stanza 12 is the epilogue). That line runs: "in the refuse of the world a new world is born" (2011, 239).

"Gramsci's Ashes" is set in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome, where the urn containing Gramsci's ashes was placed, near the grave of John Keats and the flat marble slab that covers the ashes of Shelley, author of

"Adonais", the elegy he wrote after Keats's death. Keats's "waking dream" (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851), from the closing paragraph of his "Ode to a Nightingale", appears in Mahon's lines on Cinecittà, the cinema city (stanza 7), separated only by a semi-colon from the scene of the prisoners in Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven!), instructed to entertain visitors during the mid-morning break when they are allowed outside their cells 'for air'. Mahon calls them the "wretched of the earth", using the same words as the American translation of *The International (Anthem)*: "Stand up, you wretched of the earth" (2011, 238).

There is a second reference to Keats in the previous stanza (7), where the insatiable Tourist is seen snapping up the huge accumulation of art forms in Rome and even violating 'Endymion's' grave (Keats's name transferred to the title name of one of his most famous poems) with the flash-photography of the Nikon camera. In the epilogue of "Roman Script" (stanza 12, not included in the 2011 *New Collected Poems*) we find a portrait of Keats tucked into what Mahon calls a Metastasio rewrite, showing him as an inventor of romances (read: "Lamia", "Isabella", "The Eve of St Agnes") who lived in a fever of creation (added to that caused by his illness); imagination filled the whole course of his life, making his days a dream. Mahon's own heartfelt prayer "when we wake from history | May we find peace in the substance of the true" (1999, 273) is like a modern version of the concluding lines of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851).

Even the common reader has little difficulty in seeing the destructive tendencies in tourists' amateur flash photography (back to stanza 7). The connection between Cinecittà and the inmates of Regina Coeli is harder to grasp. Yet, if we remember the use of 'feelies' (films working on the emotions) in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the connection is clearer. *Brave New World* was published in 1932, the year before Hitler came to power. Could Huxley have anticipated even then that the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps would be glossed over by a deceitful documentary film complete with roses, theatre and regular concerts, made at Theresienstadt? At the time "Roman Script" was written it was a known fact.

A flight to Venice in search of 'pedestrian silence' produced a thumbnail sketch of the city where "we" (Mahon and his travelling companion) stand on the Gesuati steps watching the city sink in the high water, while the "perpetual high tide" of "Year round tourism" gives it no respite. The brighter side of Venice appears in the room on the Janiculum in "Roman Script" with gondolas and imagined scenes of Byron's philandering and Goldoni's hilarity.

Not only Keats but Shelley too is mightily present behind the lines of "Roman Script". As Mahon laments the loss of Pasolini's "true direction" (stanza

11) and speaks of the “bright garbage on the incoming wave” produced by the “genocidal corporate imperative” of the modern industrial world, we know that the final chorus of Shelley’s “Hellas” (1822) could not have been far from his mind. It says:

The world’s great age begins anew
 The golden years return
 The earth doth like a snake renew
 Her winter weeds outworn:
 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam
 Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 771).

“Roman Script” also contains the essential message of Shelley’s “Adonais” – the luminous worth of poets (stanza 48) seen as “the kings of thought | Who waged contention with their time’s decay” contrasted with the “ages, empires and religions [that] | Lie buried in the ravage they have wrought” and “borrow not | Glory from those who made the world their prey” (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 784).

Mahon’s version of this message is most obvious in stanza 6 of “Roman Script”, which ranges from Nero and the “shrewd popes” (2011, 237) who frequent “the venial gym” in search of boy-victims, to Mozart’s Don Giovanni where his licentious life ends in a precipitous fall to Hell. It is also very present in stanza 9, which speaks of the ‘others’, the anti-fascist prisoners who were *here* in Regina Coeli, brutally tortured for their aspirations to “a society based on hope and truth” (2011, 238). They are and are not represented by Pavese, the “poet of internment” (the most lenient form of imprisonment under the Fascist régime). For Pavese, befriended by his old anti-fascist schoolmates more out of kindness than of trust, was never more than a timid anti-fascist.

Fatherless, with only a mother who died in 1930 when he was 22, and a sister to support him if he got into trouble with the régime, his slight offence was punished by a three-year sentence, of which he only served one. Certainly he suffered bitterly from solitude in an era in which (for example) women were treated like clothes hangers to hang attractive commodities on (“a hat, a pair of shoes, a blouse, a glove”, 2011, 238). A world that Moravia caught so well in *Gli indifferenti* (1929). It was this cynical, empty world that drove him to suicide. For years, like Keats, he had been “half in love with easeful death” (“Nightingale”, *The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851, stanza 6). He titled the traditionally sentimental poems he wrote for Constance Dowling *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi*. They were published posthumously in 1951. Mahon changed this title into “to him death came with [...] a glib post-war cynicism” (2011, 238). In the light of Pavese’s short stories *Prima che il gallo canti* (1949), it is clear that his self-esteem

suffered badly from the political compromise he took refuge in both before and after the war. The title itself, drawn from the Gospel story of how Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26.75) is sufficient evidence of this.

As regards the structure of “Roman Script”, it is based on the frequent changes of angle on space and time typical of the film script.¹ As the poem opens the brightly coloured flowers on the Janiculum, refreshed by night rain and Respighi’s (unmentioned) *Fountains of Rome*, seem to light up the whole city centre. Then in a flash, inside Mahon’s room, we are in Venice.

From Venice we are rushed to the land of conspiring Irish exiles destined to die in Rome. From the smart order “out you go” (2011, 237), down to Trastevere, comes what at first looks like a kind of tourist itinerary. But once across the bridge (Ponte Sisto) and round the Circo Massimo ‘race track’ we are catapulted to the floodlit “naiad and triton” (2011, 237) of the Fontana di Trevi and Via Veneto (Harry’s Bar) haunted by a jet-set not unlike that portrayed in the American Fitzgerald’s “beautiful and the damned” (2011, 237), and film actors like those in Fellini’s *La dolce vita*. Nero and popes switch us back to the Forum and basilica area, near Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. But to see the “soft marble thighs of Persephone” (2011, 238), by that other great baroque sculptor Bernini, we have to leap back across the Tiber and up to the Galleria Borghese, before being brought back by tourist photographs to the tomb of St Cecilia and Keats’s grave in the Protestant Cemetery, out in the Testaccio district. Again, the Regina Coeli prison in central Rome (Trastevere) is placed side by side with Cinecittà, outside the city altogether. The theme of decay and destruction takes us from Pasolini’s “peripheral rubbish dumps” (2011, 239), to the moral decay of Nero, the popes, Mozart’s Don Giovanni and the material decay of the large homes of the rich upper-middle class on the Janiculum, with their pretentious façades of (porous) “ochreous travertine” (2011, 237) that soak up not only the evening shadows of the poplars but huge quantities of smog as well.

Mahon’s treatment of time in “Roman Script” also shares this flexibility of the cinema camera. The first stanza starts from the present, goes back to the Respighi *Fountains* (1916), perhaps to the 1952 American musical *Singing in the Rain*, but since the fiddles “provoke” line dancing, “rain” could refer to the provoking chorus-girls of the Moulin Rouge or even to the use of music and dance in rites to propitiate rainfall. That would mean a time-span from the present to the very distant past. There follows a milder gap between Byron and Goldoni or the glamorous nun in Fellini’s film on Casanova, quite a big jump. When he comes to “our own princes” (2011, 236), the Irish exiles who sought refuge in Rome after they were defeated

1 For Mahon’s first-hand knowledge of film making (as a script writer) see his “Bowen on the Box” (*Selected Prose* 87 and following). See also “The Poetry Nonsense” (24).

at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, Mahon specifically comments that their world seems more distant now than in the days before Pompeii was buried under the ashes of Vesuvius (79 AD).

This brings him to the stabilising present of his routine of work on his poems, soon followed by the link between today's Fiat and Maserati 'contests' round the capital and the imagined chariot races of ancient Rome. From Nero to Don Giovanni is just one stride, while from the ruins of the Roman Forum to the 'ruins' (Mahon's word) below the tower blocks in the new industrial suburbs is a rocketing flight somehow less significant than the chaos created by global economy and global warming in the twenty-odd years between 1998 and the seventies, when together with Giorgio Bassani of *Italia Nostra* and many others, Pasolini was making strenuous efforts to stem the tide of global pollution ("His is the true direction we have lost", 239). Sestet 6 of the *Quaderno*, titled "Pasolini", presents a less idealised portrait of the poet-film producer, an uncensored list of things he did before he was murdered "amid the trash", but still seen shining like "a bronze bird-shape" (2008, 20).

We now need to look at the scrupulous scholarly work that goes into the making of at least some of Mahon's poems. While I was preparing the chapter on him for my *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, I came across some sheets of the Derek Mahon Papers housed at Emory University. They formed the groundwork for that perfect little poem "The Snow Party" (1975). I was amazed to find that it started off as an idea for a poem about Hiroshima. After reading John Hersey's report very carefully and identifying the most striking and distressing images, Mahon drew up a sheet of 'brainstorming'. Then, not wishing to intrude, as an outsider, on the sufferings of the Japanese people, he superimposed other images taken from Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which had been published as a Penguin in the early 1970s. The 'elsewheres' that contrast with the quietly tinkling china of the party Basho is invited to are transferred to the savagery of seventeenth-century Europe (and America?), the burning of witches and heretics and the "thousands have died since dawn | in the service of barbarous kings" (2011, 62) bent on conquest and oppression. The result is, in its way, equally horrifying, and the century-old message of human cruelty is there, but the poem gains a unity that the brainstorming did not have.

Sheets of the Emory Papers are evidence that "Ghosts", the second short poem that grew out of Mahon's 1998 visit to Italy, was part of a much more ambitious project on the exceedingly lascivious frescoes in Pompeii. These frescoes, a highlight for tourists greedy for sensations, have been completely cut out of "Ghosts". But as we know that Ibsen wrote his play of that name in the hotel in Sorrento that Mahon stayed at on his way back to Rome from Pompeii, our minds swiftly connect the dissolute way of life of Captain Alving in the play to the Pompeian frescoes.

I feel certain that stanza 8 of “Roman Script” is based on a similar technique. The immense hiatus between the Regina Coeli and Cinecittà scenes cannot just represent an empty space. The reader inevitably fills it in with the torture of anti-fascist prisoners we know to have been constant during the régime. I have no documentary proof that Mahon knew about the Nazi’s documentary film on Theresienstadt that I mentioned above. That he knew the camp existed is obvious from his article “War and Peace”, on the work of his old friend Michael Longley (2012, 224-8). There he speaks of Longley’s Holocaust poems like *Terezin* (the Czech spelling of Theresienstadt). He thinks it was his friend’s “Jewish granny, on the maternal side” who gave them their “peculiar poignancy” (2012, 227).

Mahon’s method in constructing “Roman Script” might be compared to the way Michelangelo took great blocks of marble and then cut away the superfluous parts to get to his *Prigioni* figures. That seems like a contradiction of Mahon’s definition of the frescoes of the Creation in the Sistine Chapel. He calls them a “violent comic-strip” (2011, 238), which is shocking to people brought up to think of Michelangelo as a great Renaissance painter. The violence of the *Creation* is indisputable; all the art critics call it Michelangelo’s *terribilità*. And it is a fact that today people think of the great cycles of Renaissance frescoes as the equivalent of our comic strips, just the non-Reformed Church’s alternative to the printing press. Yet the impression remains that, while both artists are baroque, Mahon had little liking for Michelangelo’s frescoes, but was delighted in Bernini’s *Persephone*, which embodies the idea of life renewed; in her “a new world is born” (2011, 239) from the underworld.

For further light on Mahon’s attitude to the Sistine Chapel we need to go to the “Quaderno” (2008, 19-21), a sort of travel journal, which conceals some very weighty matter beneath quite a casual tone. “I Penserosi” (sestet 7), for example, tells us that “We too spent time in the high, lonely tower [...] with other lamps aglow in Fiesole” (20). The clue to our desperate questions: “Who else is implied in that ‘too’? Which ‘lonely tower’? And whose are the ‘other lamps’?” is in the title. In the singular it is *Il Penseroso*, an early poem by John Milton, the grave pendant to his “L’Allegro”. He wrote them while he was living in Oxfordshire, after leaving (Cambridge) university and before coming to Italy. In *Il Penseroso* Milton says:

Let my lamp at midnight hour
 Be seen in some *high lonely tower*
 Where I may... Unsphere
 The spirit of Plato
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 1: 1448) [Emphasis added]

Of course there is no mention of Fiesole in the Oxfordshire poem. For that we have to go to *Paradise Lost*, book 1, lines 283-91, where we discover that

The superior fiend's [Satan's] [...] shield
 [...]]
 Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb
 Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
 At evening, from the top of Fesolè,
 [...] to descry new lands,
 Rivers, or mountains in her spotty globe.
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 1: 1483)

And who can the "Tuscan artist" be other than Galileo? David Masson tells us in his introduction to *Paradise Lost* (1961, 27) that Milton conversed with him near Florence in 1638. Speaking of this meeting, Milton described Galileo as "a prisoner to the Inquisition for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought" (2011, 112-3). The monstrous injustice suffered by Galileo and the humiliation of being forced to lie about his deepest convictions ("*Eppur si muove!*") to save his life if not his freedom, inspired Brecht to write a whole play, *Galileo*. Might they have prompted Mahon to insert an extra meaning in the first and last lines of his "Roman Script"? In their separate contexts, the words "cock-row" in the first and "substance of the true" (1999, 273) in the last line have no connection, while "cock-row and engine hum" (2011, 236) create a kind of merging of rural and urban that the Latin poet Horace so delightfully described at plant level.

But what if, to an ex-choir boy, commanding a clear view of St Peter's from some point on the Janiculum, "cock-row" (unlikely but literal, not an idiomatic alternative to "at first light", used in the following line) is associated with the Gospel of St Matthew, quoted above (26.75), which describes how Peter (later Saint) "went out and wept bitterly" when he remembered that Jesus had foreseen that he would deny him three times "before the cock crow"? In fact, Peter assured the soldiers at Jesus' trial, three times, that he was not one of his followers. Set against this untruth, what is the value of the expression "the substance of the true" (1999, 273)? Does it simply mean essential truth, the stuff of truth, or might that 'substance' conjure up centuries of dispute over the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation?

Since Mahon is known to revise his poems frequently, the removal of stanza 12 of "Roman Script" (the Metastasio epilogue) does not come as a surprise. The term "Rewrite" places it naturally among the *Adaptations* and without it the structure of "Roman Script" is tighter, more focused on the Pasolini section. Yet in the light of sestet 7 of the "Quaderno", which I have examined above, might not the decision to omit it in the *New Collected Poems* also mean that Mahon felt it was pointless to add to what the author of *Paradise Lost* had already said? The Catholic Church takes decisions in its own time. It was only in 1215 that the Fourth Lateran

Council fully adopted the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was reworded during the years of the Council of Trent (1545-63), at the time of the Reformation. As happened with the ‘rehabilitation’ of Galileo, no doubt also this issue will eventually be examined once again.

So much for Catholic Rome. What of Ancient Rome? Mahon pays it very little attention, jumbling “basilica, forum, fountain and frieze” (2011, 238) in one great anonymous heap. Once more, an explanation for this can be found in the “Quaderno”. Here “Geronimo”,² the fifth sestet, picks out “an Etruscan | ... at Cerveteri” (2008, 20), the site of the tombs described so tenderly by D.H. Lawrence in his *Etruscan Places* (first Penguin edition 1966). ‘Gudrun’, in “Beyond the Alps” (sestet 2, 19), one of two sisters in Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, defined by her unusual name as well as the unhappy end of her lover, confirms the link with Lawrence in this fifth sestet. In his slim volume Lawrence compares the soft, living qualities of the Etruscans with the hard, destructive Roman armies that exterminated them, leaving no doubt where his sympathies lay. Which partly explains why Mahon’s “Etruscan” “carried himself like a spry veteran | of tribal conflict, disinherited yet | blithe, and took off in an ancient Fiat” (2008, 20). And why Mahon’s take on Italy in “Roman Script” practically ignores Ancient Rome.

The picture changes completely when it comes to literature, where Mahon reveals a more than passing acquaintance with Latin and Italian writers and poets and chooses those he deals with in greater or lesser detail with great discrimination. His contributions to *The Listener* between 1970-1975 include a review of Goldoni’s *The Venetian Twins* given at the Aldwych Theatre, one of Pirandello’s *Il gioco delle parti* (*The Rules of the Game*, at the Queen’s Theatre) on 24th June 1971, another of Eduardo De Filippo’s *Napoli Milionaria* (again at the Aldwych), 8th May 1972. In July 1970 he had also reviewed Montale’s *Farfalla di Dinard* (*The Butterfly of Dinard*), an unfinished work on a novel about provincial life (in Liguria), rather reminiscent of Proust. And in June 1973 he chose to review William Weaver’s translation of Giorgio Bassani’s *Dietro la porta* (*Behind the Door*). He no doubt knew and approved of *Italia Nostra*, the association Bassani founded to defend the neglected landscapes and monuments of Italy. Incidentally he also travelled to Rome briefly for *Vogue* Magazine in the spring of 1975, the year of Pasolini’s death, to interview Anthony Burgess on “Rome and Music”.

In 1980 Mahon ‘graduated’ from BBC Radio to BBC TV, and later the ITN, Granada. Challenging and fascinating as his new work as a script-writer was, he must have realised this was taking a great risk as far as his

2 The title is taken from the name of the noble American Indian, defender of his people’s rights against the savage destruction they were subjected to by the white invaders.

creative writing was concerned. He had written, in the article “MacNeice, ‘the War’ and the BBC” that “during the 1950s, when he was busiest at Features [the BBC Features Department], there was a certain falling off in [MacNeice’s] poetry itself, though this was rectified towards the end” (2012, 132). This would be even more applicable to the very different work-rhythms involved in script writing. Besides, there was the fact that, in his case, he was beginning rather late, at thirty-nine. His doubts are obvious when he calls Harold Pinter ‘a real screenwriter’ (“Bowen on the Box”, 2012, 91).

These worries coincided with early warnings of the break-up of Mahon’s marriage, which ended in 1985. So it is not surprising to find that his original poem “Ovid in Tomis”, published in *Stand* magazine as early as the winter of 1983-1984, describes three kinds of exile, from the homeland or familiar social background, from home and family and from poetry. It is also an extraordinary study of perspectives; from present to past and on to ancient times; from past to present; from minute detail to infinity. Even more impressive is the way the voices of the ancient and the modern poets are brought so close that they are often almost indistinguishable, then really merge in the final lament for ‘our’ exile.

The first four triplets come as a shock. What can this trash of gear-box and Coca-Cola (even though “unsinkable”, hence in a sense timeless) have to do with the ancient Latin poet whose work has survived twenty centuries? Does “They stare *me* out” (emphasis added) mean they force him (Ovid), or only the modern poet, to lower his eyes? “My transformation into a stone” can only refer to the author of the *Metamorphoses*, so there can be no doubt whose name “was mud [...] | A dirty word in Rome” (2011, 140); nor that it is the modern poet who gives the reader an idea of what Ovid’s banishment on the Black Sea was like, by talk of Byron in Botany Bay or Wilde in Dawson City (US). Memories of his former success, when he “strode | Head-high in the forum” (2011, 141) make Ovid rebel, understandably, against his exile by Augustus, prolonged by his successor Tiberius. The idea of the muddle of mud huts where he is living becoming “A handsome city, | [...] port, | [...] resort” (2011, 141) (with an oil pipeline!) is feasible; whereas the dignified statue of Ovid, seen as if he was some person outside himself, can only have been thought up by the modern poet.

Then, in a phase of resignation after six years, Ovid draws a sense of purpose from observing strange sea creatures like the spiny bat-fish and pleasure from “listening hard | to the uninhibited || Virtuosity of the lark” (2011, 142). More than pertinent for anyone in the modern world, fearing his creative writing may be inhibited. This is not a Latin poet, dreaming of an impossible simple life, mixing up games of ducks and drakes (played with stones) with the latest craze for deck quoits, played with rubber or metal rings. Even when he talks about Syrinx’s metamorphosis into a tall reed, she is *keening* (an Irish word for lament) because in the modern

world reeds will be pulped to make cording for motorcar tires. And the “Pan is dead” (2011, 144) is suspiciously near the Nietzschean “God is dead” of student protest in the sixties and seventies, while at the same time making the passage from blind religious belief to serious, systematic examination of the universe as it is and as Lucretius saw it (“I | have exchanged belief | for documentation”, 2011, 144).

Fear of being abandoned by “the Muse” (the power of artistic creation) and the possible emptiness of the universe beyond our immediate world dissolve, because of the reverence that writers feel before the infinite promise of the unblemished page. The poet has achieved the “uninhibited virtuosity” of the lark in a limpid flow of thought sustained for fifty-two delightful triplets. That he feels an immense debt to Ovid goes without saying.

Mahon turned to Ovid once more in an original poem in the early nineties, when his son visited him in New York (*New York Time* 2011, 175). This visit must have brought back painful memories of the ‘bad times’ that led to the family being split up. Through Ovid’s Philomela’s *Metamorphosis* he achieved a release, a second transformation into a children’s bedtime story, no more upsetting than *Jack and the Beanstalk*, that “no malicious hands can twist or tear” (“The Old Snaps”, 2011, 103). “[S]ome silence in the street | till released children dash to bus and swing” (“Ovid on West 4th”, 2011, 173) establishes this from the start. King Tereus’ repeated bullying “send young Itys here to me” (2011, 173) only makes him look foolish. When he realises the atrocious trick the women have played on him (making him eat his own son) he “nearly had a seizure” (2011, 173). He howls an order to the furies of Styx, then makes a contemporary correction, overturns the dinner table and calls the furies from “the hobs of hell” (2011, 173). After which he brandishes his sword, ineffectively, since the two sisters (his wife and lover) merely fly off as a swallow and a nightingale; while he, transformed into a hoopoe, in the old story-telling formula “is furious still” (2011, 174).

The underlying grief seems summed up most effectively in the substitution of the routine “fires of hell” by the ‘hobs’ of hell. This absurd little device, attached to a bar of the raised Victorian grate in fireplaces to keep hot water constantly ready for making tea or grog and so on, symbolised the essence of lower-middle and working-class family comfort when things went right. Thus, so much the more hellish when they went wrong.

The other thing that strikes the reader most is the omission of the tapestry Philomela wove and sent to her sister to tell her of Tereus’ cruel way of preventing her (so he thought) from telling her sister how he raped her, by cutting out her tongue. I strongly suspect that in this version it is the poem that is the tapestry and tells a tale in which the poet, not “Philomela”, is silenced by unanswerable reproach, when actually an “impractical daughter” has had her share of responsibility in marrying someone too like her

father, a navy captain who apparently “lost [his] balance” and died like the Chinese poet Li Po; the real culprit being the distillery by the river at Portballintrae (“A Curious Ghost”, 2011, 61).

Mahon has gained his knowledge of Italian literature largely through his work on the versions and adaptations, which have now been collected in two small volumes, *Adaptations* (2006) and *Echo's Grove* (2013). It should be emphasised that they are part of a work in progress, which is gradually moving towards a collection of world poetry, universal, at times even cosmic, so that the Italian and Latin contributions only represent a small part of the whole. Starting, as he tells us in the foreword to *Adaptations*, as something “poets use [...] to keep the engine ticking over” (2006, 11), they eventually contributed to earning him the Scott-Moncrieff award for translation, which must be the most prestigious prize in this category. Mahon insists that they are not in the tradition of literal translation and makes no secret of the fact that he often relies on recognised scholarly works as a point of departure. What he fears most is the uniformity suggested by Robert Lowell in the introduction to his *Imitations* (1961). He tells us that what dictate (his) choice of poems in the first place are “affinities of idea, shape and atmosphere”, as well as, in the case of Ovid for example, “an imagined kinship” (2013, 18).

Mahon is very economical with dates. Even his date of birth is given only as 1941, while Haughton adds that it was “after the Blitz of spring 1941”. The earliest of Mahon’s versions or adaptations of poems in Italian seems to be *Gramsci's Ashes* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, first published in *The Irish Times* on 25 October 1986. This might mean he wrote it during or just after the years he spent as a scriptwriter for the BBC and Granada. It only includes the first section of Pasolini’s long poem, written in 1954, over twenty years before his death in 1975. At that time, obviously, Mahon was over thirty and would have had an opportunity to see Pasolini’s films in London. From them he would have understood how intelligent and creative Pasolini’s mind was and the memories of the films must often have returned to him during his script-writing experience.

The manner of Pasolini’s death offended everyone but neo-fascists and neo-nazis. I have already shown when I was looking at “Roman Script” that Mahon saw him as a martyr; the more so because his atrocious death, perpetrated by suburban louts, was almost certainly ordered by sinister puppet-masters behind the scenes. Hence the adaptation of “Gramsci’s Ashes” presents a sort of dual martyrdom, since the “brother” who drew “the ideal society” also suffered (slow) death at the hands of the fascist régime. Paradoxically, he also suffered the injustice of being buried, or re-buried in Rome’s non-Catholic cemetery, among English and other aristocrats; he, who had given his entire life to the cause of the working man. Probably, when he made this comment, Pasolini did not know that the reburial took place in 1938, the year the Racial Laws came into force, render-

ing all minorities more vulnerable. No doubt Gramsci's sister-in-law made this decision because fascist fanatics might have desecrated his grave, if it had been left in the Verano cemetery. The surrounding Testaccio district is more in sympathy with Gramsci's ideas, with its anonymous, barrack-like blocks of flats where the workers live on the dirty-yellow top-floors by the mud of the Tiber, and (though this is not a new suburb) the accompanying trash which Pasolini had joined with Giorgio Bassani to combat. Another reason, as I have already pointed out, why Mahon felt akin to him.

Adaptations includes just one short poem by Umberto Saba (1883-1957). Mahon has placed it between Rilke and Pasternak, making him more Mittel-European than Italian. Saba was born in Trieste, of a non-Jewish father but Jewish mother and later joined the Jewish community of Trieste. Consequently, though he was not deported, he had a very hard time from 1938 until the war ended. He survived with the help of various friends, one of them Montale, who put him up for a time. A good literary reason for choosing "A Siren", the poem in question, is that Saba championed the cause of 'honest' poetry. "A Siren" is honest but not ingenuous. It skilfully portrays a beautiful young swimming champion who has charmed an older man, superimposing her image on the healthy mother figure encouraged to practice sport (but not mental activity) so that she will be able to produce a large healthy family to colonise a fascist empire.

Mario Luzi's "Trout in the Water" (2013, 152) is a superb poem. It sings like Schubert but with even more power and variety of rhythm. Behind the lines, but never expressed in obvious religious terminology, an enquiring mind is asking fundamental philosophical and religious questions. The water is the trout's true element and it is true to it; in its turn the water protects the trout and enhances its vision. The poet thinks that both the trout and the river may have some idea of their own identity because they belong to the 'greater wisdom' beyond themselves. This is all the more important because we human beings probably spin (invent) heavens (paradise) in our dreams as a defence against suffering. We cannot forget, either, that early Christians drew a fish to represent Christ and the Scriptures were seen as the water Christianity was sustained in.

Mahon's *Adaptations* also includes "A Rewrite - *from the Italian of Pietro Metastasio, 1698-1782*" (2006, 46). Owing to the vagaries of history, after Austria replaced Spain as the dominant power in Italy, Metastasio was installed in comfortable exile as a court poet in Vienna from 1830 until his death in 1882. There he produced the librettos for many brilliant operas. As a poet he was very pre-Romantic. Mahon's 'remake', originally placed at the end of "Roman Script", might among other things have been a comment on the predominance of opera/melodrama in the Italian musical world, certainly until the 1970s. Traditionally, orchestral music had been largely neglected; even the famous Accademia di Santa Cecilia was always very traditional. On the strictly literary level "when we wake from history"

(l. 13) is a variation on Stephen Dedalus' response to his chauvinist headmaster's provocation (in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, episode 2): "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake".

The adaptation "A Dirge" is not based on John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi*, which Mahon knew and had seen performed, but on the life of the original Duchess, Giovanna d'Aragona (1490-1520). While he was in Rome in 1998, Mahon had several conversations with Barbara Amendola, who was carrying out research on Giovanna and may also have suggested that poems by the great Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa would provide examples of the kind of language Giovanna would have used. Mahon chose the form of the dramatic monologue developed by Robert Browning for the first part of "A Dirge" (1999, 268). The dialogue conveys Giovanna's courage in claiming her right to a life of pleasure with "the one I venerate and deify" and contrasts it with her punishment, alone, desperate and desolate, abandoned even by this chosen companion. What Mahon is most interested in is why present-day audiences, in a society of wealth and bright lights, are still charmed and dazzled by the cruelty, corruption and violence of this now extinct provincial court.

The answer is that the harshness of our own violent time is global, cosmic. Even present-day theatre is sententious but encourages those who indulge in luxury at the expense of the public purse and are also responsible for the proliferation of warplanes and 'dumb' bombs. The "cricket [...] racket" couplet is particularly revealing, because the game of cricket, played throughout the British Empire, gave rise to the expression 'it's not cricket', meaning 'it's not fair play', a criterion seldom respected by the present ruling classes, who are associated with the grating "high-pitched chatter" of their ladies and the "racket" (also dishonest trading) or loud noise of cheering at cricket matches. In contrast, the Duchess Giovanna deserves homage for her courageous defence of her own and other women's rights.

No collection of World Poetry would be complete without some connection with the old legends about heroic knights. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) takes up the theme of the medieval French *Chanson de Roland*. Typically, in the adaptation "Night and Day", Mahon chooses lines not about Orlando's success as a warrior, but the gentler side of the work, as in the episode of Angelica and the young Moor whom she finds by chance as she escapes from Orlando. She looks after, then marries him and they spend their honeymoon happily in the woods.

"Night and Day" (2006, 40) has something of Browning's "Meeting at Night", in the furtive approach of the lover (not in the country here but down a city colonnade). The "faint squeak" of the opening door recalls

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And the blue spurt of a lighted match

And a voice less loud
 [...]

 Than the two hearts beating each to each!
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 1362)

Which leaves the erotic details of “Night and Day” (“exploding like the sulphurous candlelight”, 2006, 40) to the imagination. The Victorian poet’s “Parting at Morning”, when “the sun looked down over the mountain’s rim” (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 1362), is business-like and clean cut. The “Night and Day” adaptation ends with regret at ‘banishment’ when day breaks and the plea “can we not live in a world of love forever?” (2006, 40) rings like a distant echo of the student movement slogan ‘make love not war’, which I shall be looking at when I come to the Latin poetry in the adaptations.

Having worked on Vittoria Colonna’s poems as he prepared Giovanna d’Aragona’s monologue, Mahon could not fail to go on to Michelangelo’s impressive sonnets, modestly called *Rime*. Whatever doubts he may have had about the gigantic Sistine frescoes, the weighty, finely chiselled lines of these *Rime* prompted him to adapt two of them. He probably chose the one about art vanquishing death, partly because the theme would be familiar to his English-speaking readership from Shakespeare’s famous sonnets. With the exception of the technical chemical term *calcium carbonate* and the over-chummy “the pair of us” (2006, 41) addressed to Vittoria Colonna, whom Michelangelo always treated with great deference, Mahon has not yielded to the temptation of peppering this adaptation up with colloquial and contemporary expressions. The sonnet devoted towards the subject of death also throws light on Michelangelo’s attitude to the Church. In the sestet, which points out that God’s promise to mankind has not yet been fulfilled, Mahon renders “per chi ti crede” with “your saints expect”, probably referring to the circle of deeply religious people gathered round Vittoria Colonna and inspired by Juan de Valdès (1500-1541), who hoped for a spiritual reformation of the church. Of course, as a young man in Florence, Michelangelo had been impressed by Savonarola’s sermons, not yet fanatical as they later became (Careri 2013, 271).

In November 2009, the year Seamus Heaney turned seventy, Derek Mahon made *The Poetry Nonsense* with Heaney, his other old friends Michael and Edna Longley and some younger ones. In 2010, commenting on this ‘docudrama’, he wrote, “in my seventieth year I have finally put *The Poetry Nonsense* behind me, or very nearly. The task is done and now I can turn to prose with an easy mind” (2012, 24). That “or very nearly” must refer in part to his adaptations, the second volume of which, *Echo’s Grove*, came out in 2013. Not surprisingly, this includes two sonnets by Petrarch (1304-1374), who died at the age of seventy. They were both written after the death of Laura, which changed Petrarch’s life and way of life completely.

As he mourned for Laura, fearing the grief that overwhelmed him when he was alone in his little bed in his austere little room, he accepted the company of common people whom he had shunned before Laura died. Above all, he says, his vein of inspiration has dried up and he will write no more poetry. The last line of the second sonnet Mahon chose runs: “et la cetera mia rivolta in pianto” (and my lyre turns to weeping). As I have already pointed out, Mahon’s adaptations are, intentionally, never literal. But for that last line of Petrarch he gives us: “and the strings whimper in a minor key” (2013, 70), which seems to me to go far beyond adaptation. In “the strings” I hear the first words of the title of Louis MacNeice’s autobiography, taken from a scene in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act 4, scene 3, line 291) as Mahon explains in an old review (2012, 121). It is the night before Philippi and Brutus hears his boy Lucius talking in his sleep. He says: “The strings, my lord, are false”, meaning out of tune.

We associate “whimper” with the last lines of T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”: “This is the way the world ends | Not with a bang but a whimper” (*The Norton Anthology*, 22: 2386). Written in 1925, after *The Waste Land*, it sums up a period of decline after World War I. Finally, “in a minor key” refers, I think, to Mahon’s work on adaptations of poems in non-English languages. I simply do not believe that this line was written merely “to keep the engine ticking” (2006, 11). To me it is a very moving line of original contemporary poetry. I know a poet’s voice changes in his later years, when his main work has been completed. My impression is that, when Mahon wrote “the task is done”, he was thinking, with apprehension for his friend, of the ‘early warning’ Heaney had a few years before his final illness in 2013.

As regards Mahon’s adaptations of works by Latin poets, these include (not in a chronological order) Ovid, Juvenal, Propertius and Horace, concluding with the wonderful “Lucretius on Clouds”, drawn from the sixth book of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. The short original poem “Tractatus” has a reference to Tacitus. From what I have said about Mahon’s original poems “Ovid in Tomis” and “Ovid on 4th West”, it should already be clear how he felt about the great love-poet’s work. The four adaptations of Ovid that he has published so far require little comment. There are two excerpts from the *Amores* (i.v and ii.x) in “Ovid in Love”, the lovely legends of Galatea (Pygmalion) and Echo (both from the *Metamorphoses*) and Ariadne’s complaint about Theseus’ ingratitude (*Heroides* 10) after she saved his life with her spool of thread. These adaptations seem more than usually respectful of the original texts. *Amores* I.V has a girl “capering in the nip” and her gown, torn from her, ‘squirming’ on the floor. The opening lines of “Galatea” (“Pygmalion lived... alone | without a wife to call his own”, 2013, 42) have a faint echo of an old drinking song, but the analogy stops short there. In the Echo story Jupiter’s nymphs, warned by Echo, “skedaddled” (ran off in a hurry) (2013, 45), to prevent Juno from

surprising him with them; again, an isolated touch. Ariadne's story is completely without colloquialisms.

There can be no doubt why there is one of Juvenal's brilliant satires among the adaptations, since it corresponds so nearly to twentieth/twenty-first century global society. Mugging at the bottom end, poisoning anyone inconvenient at the top, tax evasion even in the middle. Limitless self-indulgence in diet, drugs and sexual habits end in early physical and mental disintegration, including the familiar 'anecdotalage' (telling the same stories *ad nauseam* in old age); feminine attractions are flaunted in vain; for family affection read greed for inheritance.

Propertius's "Sextus and Cynthia" cycle is also outstanding for its 'present-day' features. I was rather surprised to find that, while Mahon defines it as an "exercise", all nine sections are included; rather out of proportion to the space allotted even to Ovid. The availability of a reliable translation by the 'real translator' Gilbert Highet (see Foreword to *Echo's Grove*) may have counted for something here. But I think the deciding factor was that this cycle lends itself to the introduction of very colloquial language, as happened with Molière's *L'école des maris*' and *L'école des femmes*' adaptations, which were very successful in the theatre in the 1980s.

Cynthia's ghost reminds the poet of their one-time "shenanigans" (this is now accepted English - originally it was almost certainly Irish), calls him a "lying sod", his women visitors "floozyies" (2013, 37); his new mistress is merely a "whore" (37). It is hard to place Cynthia socially. On the one hand, Sextus trusts her judgment of his writings, based on close attention ("how she listens when I read", in "Epic Love", 2013, 29). She is expert in the arts of lovemaking, conceding almost complete surrender; yet "she rules me with an iron fist" (2013, 31), and asserts her independence by occasionally going away to the country or the sea alone. If she unexpectedly returns while he is having a "Quiet Orgy", with "her dander up" (2013, 35), she punches him in the face with her fist like any plebeian; yet, she cannot be one of the plebs, because she had a faithful nurse who took good care of her while she was dying; she asks Sextus to look after her in her declining years. For his part, Sextus entirely adheres to the 'Make love not war' program - "wrestling with Cynthia is war enough" (2013, 30).

The poems of all the Latin authors Mahon has chosen contain considerations on philosophical and religious things that seem to reflect different phases in his own thinking on these matters. I have already mentioned the "Pan is dead [...] I | have exchanged belief | for documentation" (2013, 144) in "Ovid in Tomis". The Juvenal satire ends cryptically "and if | you want to worship mere materialism, | that modern god we ourselves have invented" (2013, 50) points out that this new 'religion', which seemed so honest and truthful, is open to the same objection such as the old world religions. It was born of the human need to combat the fear of the unknown future. Juvenal's solution is stoicism.

Horace's "How to Live" (*Odes*, 1, v. 2) also contains a touch of stoicism. But Horace had learned wisdom through living in very uncertain times and so emphasises the importance of enjoying life while we can without worrying about the future. "Decant your wine" (2013, 27) he adds, which is easier if you follow the example of his famous country mouse and opt to go back to the country. Propertius proposes to "spend my old age studying natural things, | [...] the spiritual economy of life on Earth" (2013, 30). This is getting very near to Lucretius.

Of all these Latin authors, Mahon seems to feel nearest to the poet-philosopher Lucretius, who adopted a flexible version of Epicurus' atomistic theory. Philosophy apart, they have their great love of clouds in common. Throughout Mahon's work, clouds are omnipresent, both physically and metaphorically. What is particularly striking in "Lucretius on Clouds" is the way the formations and transformations of clouds are shown to correspond to movements in the human organism, creating a deep sense both of the multiplicity and the one-ness of the universe. For Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is not only a scientific examination of detail, it coheres in its powerful poetry.

The short, original poem "Tractatus" (2011, 111) is one of Mahon's upside-down, 'circular' creations. The Latin author here is Tacitus, close friend of Pliny the Younger and famous for his *Histories* and *Annals* based on contemporary letters and Senate documents but also largely too on the gossip of the exclusive social circles he moved in. This is no doubt why Mahon introduces his story of sailors *hearing* the sun sinking in the western sea. Which is followed by the extremely ironical question: "who would question that titanic roar, | The steam rising wherever the edge may be?" (2011, 111). Of course in those days the earth was still believed to be flat, so that you (or a ship) could fall off the edge if you came to it. So we are back at the beginning, with Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921) and the striking 'first proposition': "The world is everything that is the case" (2011, 111). Everything from a very small creature to a wonderful creation of art: "The fly giving up in the coal-shed | To the Winged Victory of Samothrace" (111).

Mahon follows this up with a bitter answer to the question that haunts all believers – why, if God created the world and everything in it, did he allow evil and injustice to exist; why should even a small innocent creature such as a fly suffer for no reason? Or the passengers on a splendid liner like the Titanic die undeservedly, when it sank in 1912? Do even the wonders of great art compensate for such things? The non-believers' answer (lines 3-6) is that God did a bad job when he created our very imperfect, though in many ways wonderful world. Which is probably why he is represented in religious paintings as old and white-haired. Yet, behind "The fly that gives up in the cold-shed | To the Winged Victory of Samothrace" (111) there are echoes of one of the 'great' hymns Mahon used to sing as a choir-boy:

All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small
All things wise and wonderful
 The Lord God made them all.
 (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1964, 2) [Emphasis added]

Strictly speaking, most of “Tractatus” has nothing to do with Italy. It does, however, have a great deal to do with the kind of person and the kind of poet Derek Mahon is and, consequently, has determined what aspects of Italian history, thought, art and literature he is interested in.

This essay has endeavoured to show how widely Mahon’s knowledge of Italian culture ranges across time and space: his visit to Italy certainly constituted a sound basis for his deep understanding of our country, but it was particularly his encyclopedic erudition combined with a fervid curiosity and the gaze of a keen observer that shaped his imagination. As a cosmopolitan writer, he constantly seeks to expand and enrich his own and the reader’s way of looking at the world. In this sense, his poetry crosses all borders, and his view of Italian ‘otherness’ is ultimately a celebration of the power of poetry to bring us to ourselves.

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