# JAUNDICE

## *Bill Tinley*

DEREK MAHON, *The Yellow Book.* Gallery Press, £6.95 / £12.95
*Racine's Phaedra.* Gallery Press, £6.95 / £12.95
*Journalism.* Gallery Press, £19.95

In section IV of *The Yellow Book*, the follow-up to *The Hudson Letter*, Derek Mahon asks "Has art, like life itself, its source in agony?" It's not the first time Mahon has tackled Yeats's old chestnut. In fact, his poetic project since *Antarctica* is fundamentally concerned with making art out of life, conflating the two in a desperate attempt to trump the old master (whom he insists on misrepresenting, let it be said). This is made all the more startling because of the absence of sharp-focus autobiography from Mahon's work prior to "Achill" in 1985. Since then we have had the frankness of "Dawn at St Patrick's", the only new piece in *Selected Poems*, followed by "The Yaddo Letter" and the consciously autobiographical *The Hudson Letter.* The dramatic change in the work produced since the early 1980s is proof of the major crisis in Mahon's art, for having come to the abyss at the end of "Ovid in Tomis", contemplating the blank page, like Marlow he has recoiled from the intensity of whatever truth he witnessed there. After a fallow ten years, Mahon has devised a means to beat the silence imposed by that failure of nerve—he now writes almost exclusively in an autobiographical mode and he has embraced the semi-narrative sequence in place of the merciless lyric.

Of course, the extended sequence is not without merit and *The Hudson Letter* seemed to create opportunities for Mahon not only to emerge from a lengthy silence but to explore alternatives to the kind of work he had polished to perfection in *The Hunt by Night.* Indeed, that change of direction suggested artistic risk. However, despite the gracefulness and beauty of most of the writing in *The Yellow Book*—and we expect no less from Mahon—it would appear he is going down a cul-de-sac. Where a proliferation of quotations in his previous book suggested the polyphony or perhaps cacophony of New York, here the smattering of phrases in inverted commas, many of them from Mahon's previous work, imply an abdication of authority, the effect being more often farcical than ironic.

Since his first collection, *Night-Crossing*, in 1968 Mahon has virtually patented a couple of stock settings—the poet at night, the poet observing the world from an open window. Here, he kicks off with a prologue translation of Baudelaire, poet *par excellence* of the dark and brumous city, and begins the

sequence proper with "Night Thoughts" in which we find him "wide-eyed in an attic room" in the pre-dawn quiet before the tourists commence their invasion. The tone is nostalgic, rose-tinted sentimentality giving way only to a crank's impatience with the "package crowd". This is a central problem in this book, for while seeming to endorse George Moore's dictum that a "mature artist takes the material closest to hand", Mahon declines to transform that material; the irritations he peddles as comments on the breakdown of aesthetics and world order come across as typical of a million beslippered fifty-somethings.

Although allergic to Yeats, and developing a resistance to comparison with MacNeice, Mahon has always found it fruitful to imply affinities with artistic forebears, notably Beckett, Hamsun and Camus. In section III here, he delivers an intriguing soliloquy in the voice of Elizabeth Bowen whose symbolic Irish home was perhaps the "Sunday mail-boat", somewhere between England and Ireland. "I feel like a traitor spying on my past" he has Bowen say, but inadvertently he has fingered the source of his own artistic malaise.

The poet who once bristled at the suggestion that Irishness might productively inform literary creation now laments the passing of good old 1960s Dublin "where a broadsheet or a broadcast might still count", while the provincialism that prompted him to look for artistic invigoration to London and New York is now recast as a "witty independence" that "valued things beyond the world of sense". Having quit the bright lights of the Big Apple, Mahon concludes in the quiet backwaters of Kinsale where the automated lighthouse dispenses "a routine enlightenment, bright but abandoned", ultimate symbol of the new Ireland in thrall to technology, betraying its "real" past.

In the twentieth and final sequence the poet sounds his fin-de-siècle note, a reprise of "The Globe in North Carolina", the world diminished to an inconsequential component of the infinite galaxies in which the human individual is nevertheless presented as a focus of value and meaning. The closing image of the white islands of the Cyclades calling to Mahon to "Come on; come on!" effectively seconds the great Joycean "Yes", but it is one of the few positive, felt sentiments of the sequence. As always, Mahon's writing is elegant, his prosodic skill impeccable, but this technical ability is in service to the kind of reductiveness that so undermines the work of Philip Larkin. Almost all of the sections, apart from the translations from Juvenal and Baudelaire and the exquisite "Aphrodite's Pool", present in microcosm Mahon's failure of vision, for each begins boldly only to unravel inevitably in mundanity and indecisiveness. Like Klimt's mermaids which adorn the cover of *The Yellow Book*, Mahon's new mode seems at home in neither of two elements, the purely lyrical or the plainly narrative. Simply to write down a life is not to make of it the stuff of art. Undoubtedly Mahon's lyric impulse is straining to take on that transformative role. Perhaps it will happen soon.

In section IX of *The Yellow Book* Mahon pays tribute to Dearbhla Molloy for her electric performance as Phaedra in the Gate's production of his own ver-

sion of Racine's original. As he has shown over the past thirty years, Mahon is a superb translator from the French, both in poetry and dramatic verse. In *Racine's Phaedra* he has wisely chosen to depart from Racine's rigid Alexandrine couplets, mixing blank verse with occasional passages of rhymed lines and affording himself in the process the possibility of heightening linguistic tension as the action demands.

This relatively short version condenses the play into two parts. Mahon has avoided the temptation to contemporize the language through the introduction of slang, an option he utilized in *The School for Wives* and *The Bacchae*, maintaining the tragic timbre of this piece in an extraordinarily supple verse that strikes a balance between a scenario that could not be plausibly presented in a modern setting and the demands of a contemporary audience. The pace of the dénouement is perhaps too rapid, although it is not unlike *King Lear* in that respect. As poetry, this work reaffirms Mahon's superiority and makes one long for him to apply that skill in pursuit of insights of his own.

I began reading *Journalism* with no small measure of scepticism. Apart from three relatively short articles, two on MacNeice and one on Brian Moore, the pieces here are of review length. Unlike Heaney and Brodsky, Mahon has not ventured into the essay genre, and I was not sanguine about the merits of this selection. However, Terence Brown has done a splendidly simple job as editor, arranging the items by theme and subject so that we begin with four pieces on MacNeice, move on to Beckett, Moore and a host of Anglo-Irish writers before branching out to cover a variety of authors valued by Mahon, and concluding with some travel pieces and reviews reflecting on Irish life.

The more extended pieces suggest that Mahon is both a perceptive and level-headed critic, one we might value highly if he stretched himself a bit more. The reviews indulge his wit and aphoristic side but they tend to whet one's appetite for more rather than offer any substantial satisfaction in the context of a book. The glimpses one gets of original insight leave only regret that he does not take up the challenge of looking in more detail at the poetry of Beckett, symbolism in the fiction of Brian Moore and, more generally, the work of Irish poets after Kavanagh.

It is easy to see why Mahon has not taken on the essay, for his prose style is brisk and his concerns eclectic and his focus intense but brief. He may well frown on kitsch and the post-modern in *The Yellow Book*, but his American journalism shows him to be quite at home when picking and choosing, preferring a flavour of things to the full meal. Ultimately, *Journalism* presents little more than flavours from a life in literature and while it is scarcely "professorial" in scope, to use his term for Heaney's tone in *The Government of the Tongue*, it is never less than engaging, offering a rather quixotic perspective on Mahon's true work.