

*AN AUTUMN WIND: THE ANCIENT AND THE CONTEMPORARY IN DEREK MAHON'S
POETRY*

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to understand how and why the book *An Autumn Wind* (2010), by the well-acclaimed northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, depicts the contemporary landscape of Northern Irish poetry as a ruined intercultural dialogue between ancient and contemporary forms of writing. In order to fulfil this objective, it is going to examine the dynamics of the three parts of the book through a close reading of three poems: “Under the Volcanoes”, “Autumn Fields” (a translation of the Chinese poet To Fu) and “Up at the Palace” (another translation of the supposedly Indian poet Gopal Shinagh. Through this analysis, it seeks to represent how poetry interacts with the contemporary dilemmas, such as cultural translation and instrumental reason.

KEYWORDS: Derek Mahon, Tradition, Modernity, Chinese and Indian poetry

RESUMO: O objetivo desse artigo é compreender como e por que o livro *An Autumn Wind* (2010), do renomado poeta norte irlandês, *Derek Mahon*, representa a paisagem contemporânea da poesia do Norte da Irlanda como um diálogo baseado nas ruínas entre primitivas e contemporâneas formas de escrita. De modo a desenvolver nossa análise, pretendemos analisar mais detalhadamente os poemas: “Under the Volcanoes”, “Autumn Fields” (uma tradução do poeta chinês To Fu) e “Up at the Palace” (outra tradução do suposto poeta Indiano Gopal Shinagh. Por meio de nossa análise, pretendemos demonstrar como a poesia interage com os dilemas contemporâneos como a tradução cultural e o pensamento instrumental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Derek Mahon, Tradição, Modernidade, Poesia Chinesa e Indiana

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand how and why the book *An Autumn Wind* (2010), by the well-acclaimed northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, depicts the contemporary landscape of Northern Irish poetry as a ruined intercultural dialogue between ancient and contemporary forms of writing.

This representation is performed through a poetical volume which reveals a three-fold approach. The first part is dedicated to poems that explore the tensions between nature and modernity. They usually have Ireland as their main setting and embody a wide variety of themes and forms. The second part consists of translations of Chinese poems from the Tang Dynasty (618 –

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907), more specifically by the poets Li T'ai Po (701-762), Ch'iu Wein (710-775) and Tu Fu (712-770). These poems deal with the theme of the simplicity of life and the contemplation of the environment. The last part is dedicated to the translations of poems by the fictitious Hindi poet Gopal Singh (supposedly born in Kashmir, in 1959). In contrast to the previous sections, these poems are permeated with a sharp irony towards India's national myths, such as spirituality, mysticism and traditions. Through this mechanism, the poet demonstrates how cultural heritages become commodities in late capitalism.

Not only does triple structure makes complex the idea of an intercultural dialogue between continents, but also reveals the incongruities and injustices of late capitalism, independently of its geographical space. The "translation" from the social to the lyric hints at a form of redemption in which poetry acts as a critical voice in the representation of social contradictions. By redemption I am taking on board the Benjaminian concept, which, for the critic Fábio Durão, is closely linked to conflicts and revolution:

redemption is a code word or figure for the Revolution, a political as well as an epistemological category. The simplest and the most impossible task: this is not an antinomy, nor even an aporia, but the composition of a force-field, the placing together of opposites in the exhibition of the matter at hand, one in which the writing will have the utmost importance. (DURÃO, 2008, p. 37)

In the case of *An Autumn Wind*, the contradictions surround the primitive aspect of the poetic genre in relation to the post-modern age of virtual reproduction and mass media. It is as if the poet, by mixing different worldviews, wished to elevate the lyric to the level of the ruin – a landmark of a past civilization that imprints its legacy in contemporary life. Nonetheless, this aspect of the past is not envisioned through an idealistic outlook, but made complex through the eyes of the contemporary world. Moreover, the ruin, as the artistic artifact, is utterly complex and out of joint

with modernity. It cannot find its feet, nor space within this new environment. Thus, poetry's very condition of existence depends on categories of time, not the linear and the positivistic time, but the complex time of the benjaminian *Angelus Novus*, the one that is dragged towards the future but that, in its melancholic regard, carries the whole tragedy of the past. Nonetheless, I would like to add that this *Angel*, metamorphosed by the poet, is not as tragic as Benjamin's, but one that is highly critical of the ruin. The speaker of the poem identifies the contradictions of the past and denounces them in the light of the present. In addition to an acute scrutiny of the lack of coherence of the present, he sees the past not so much in its tragic state, but also in its incongruity.

In this manner, the compositional practice adopted by Derek Mahon actualizes the *Angel of History* by Walter Benjamin by exposing the contradictions of the past in relation to the present. *Angelus Novus*, by Benjamin, instead of looking at civilization's tragedy as simple and unified, sees in it its uneven and contradictory nature. He is dragged to the future, but his eyes remain on the ruin, or the moment when a change could have happened, but actually did not. Mahon assumes this pessimistic outlook due to the general state of not only Ireland, but also of European societies at the end of the century: economic crisis, a generalized growth of virtual medias, the end of collective experience and the failure in interpersonal relations all assist in the construction of an ominous present. Nonetheless, instead of encouraging social transformation, this state of crisis hampers action and produces a nostalgic laugh – a sense that art is irrevocably bound to follow the failure of neoliberal societies. The financial crisis that tamed the Celtic Tiger also devastated industrialized countries. Opposed to this general state, emerging economies became the focus of attention. Highly remarkable, amongst those, there is China and India, both places chosen for the second and third parts of the volume.

Contrary to a vulgar materialist reading that makes blunt connections between history and poetry, I wish to convey the idea that the recuperation of those countries' poetry and their world

view is a proto-political wish to recover a utopian project. Nevertheless, in the attempt to envision another version of the present, the poet conveys that those places are also inserted in the same logic – as seen in the poems about India. The utopian space, hence, is transferred to something else rather than the materiality of society, but perhaps the beauty of the Autumn winds, the brightness of the moonshine or the spirituality of the Indian people. This is precisely the ending of poems of the three sections, since they reflect on the emptiness of human life, once the idealist dream was also colonized by the cultural logic of postmodernity.

In order to demonstrate how these three parts depict the complication of utopia in Ireland, China and India, I am going to analyse the final poems of each section and to show how the three parts interact and mirror each other. First, “Under the Volcanoes”, then “Autumn Fields” by Tu Fu and “Up at the Palace” by Gopal Shinagh. The three poems read in order create an ascending movement, from a lower to a higher state. And indeed, those states depart from the natural world – volcanoes and fields – and reach the artificial – the Palace. I would like to add that the essence of the poems is a radical one: a refusal to write poetry as it has been written throughout the centuries. Additionally, Mahon’s refusal becomes an innovation since cultural translation and spatial and temporal dislocations become his very manner to re-enchant the world, and by re-enchantment I mean – *pace* Walter Benjamin – a re-education of the senses and of the sensibility to perceive, in the catastrophe of the present, ruins of the past and perhaps, a new outlook on society in general.

The poem “Under the Volcanoes” is written according to the essay-like structure. Through a visit to the isle of Lanzarote in Spain the poet invites readers:

To see things as they were and might be like:
 low-lying life tucked into the landscape,
 not only heritage built on igneous rock
 still cruel to the eye, hot to the touch,

formed from the dark interior of the globe
 where cork and honeysuckle start from the scratch (2010, p. 52).

The poetic voice is objective, although the musicality of the verse harkens back to a poetic mode more linked to the lyric. The voice incites readers to pay a closer look to the forms and shapes of the place where he is. Through the activity of contemplation and description, he does not wish to give room to the readers' own reflections – he keeps making association after association until the final conclusion. Only at the end of the poem is the reader permitted to think. The overflow of images and arguments is also a device that re-enchants the cognitive senses and entices them to perceive art through a new gaze – this new outlook I denominate translational. By translational I mean the ability to see in the different, details that are not fully grasped by the majority. As Walter Benjamin stated in his essay on translation, something new is always recovered and discovered with the translational act. In this case, being in a foreign land is what enables him not to rest in the passivity of the verse, but perturb it with references to the outside world: the bank crashes, the daily reading of the newspapers and the images of tourists enjoying themselves far from home.

In this case the poet is in Lanzarote, on holiday, and in this apparent restful state of the mind, he tries to re-educate himself outside the paradigms established by bourgeois society. This education is found in the quotation by the artist and architect Cesar Marinque, who envisioned a new architecture to the island that would – simultaneously – favor the environment and encourage tourism. At the same time, the typical volcanic landscape of the place reminds the poet of the precondition of art:

Under the volcanoes, active furnaces
 to remind us of the origins of the arts.
 Do we need disaster to bring out the best,
 calamity as a necessary precondition?

All in all, the poem is about how:

‘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 (2015, p. 52)

The four long stanzas function as a descriptive reflection that gives importance and prominence to the fact that there must be a way out of the crisis represented in “the financial pages of the *Herald Tribune*”. In this case, the poet addresses, particularly, the Irish people who spend their holidays in the Canary Isles – to where the flights are still relatively inexpensive. The “temperate spring” the poet longs for may be a genuine longing for a more egalitarian society, or simply an ironic ending that reaffirms the bourgeois train of thought while trying to escape from it. The solution to this equation is given more clearly with other poems of the section.

The next poem, “Autumn Fields”, is a translation of the poem by Tu Fu and deals basically with the theme of reflection before death. The poet seems to be in exile and dissatisfied with the general state of affairs. Nonetheless, he also demonstrates he does not wish to change this picture, since he seems to be at the twilight of his life and not having any hope of change. This is clearly stated in the first two stanzas of the piece in which he affirms:

It’s easy to understand the flow of life
 where everything fulfills its own nature
 with fish happiest in the deepest water
 and birds most at home in the leafiest wood;
 but worldly ambition is for younger men,
 at my age, I resigned to the failing powers.
 An autumn wind shivers my walking stick
 but peace of mind resides in ferns and flowers. (2010, p. 63)

Also, the poet seems to be in a dislocated place of exile, since he declares: “We’re living

here in exile at Keuei-chou/ among country people on the middle of Yangtse” (2010, p. 63). This interception of biography, moral views and history is part of the poetic genre in Chinese poetry. Thus, having lived during the Lushan Rebellion and witnessed the distresses of the war, Tu Fu led a largely itinerant life unsettled by wars, associated famines and imperial displeasures. This period of unhappiness was what turned Tu Fu into a poet: Eva Shan Chou has written that:

What he saw around him—the lives of his family, neighbors, and strangers—what he heard, and what he hoped for or feared from the progress of various campaigns—these became the enduring themes of his poetry. (1995, p. 62)

Due to this reason, the poem is permeated with a confessional tone that was also used by the literary Mahon himself in the first section. The difference this piece presents is that this poet has no sense of hope. The natural environment does not offer comfort: the environment is peaceful in itself, hence, the task of humanity is to change, as he mentions in the last stanza:

My intention was to shine among the eagles
but it's ducks and geese I'm going down among.
The autumn wind is in full spate
I hear the thundering gorges roar at night.
The upland paths are blocked by the strewn rubble
and timber; the immense clouds obscure the sun.
My children chatter in local tongue
and I can't see them prospering in Chang-an (2010, p. 62)

Right in the last line, there is the lack of hope: a sense that the general state of affairs is not likely to change. Although the poet's children sing in their native tongue and carry out ancient traditions, what could be seen as a momentary comfort, the poet expresses the feeling of loss and

lack of trust in their actions. The evocation of the ruins through “the strewn rubble”, and the “immense clouds” portray the gloomy nature of the present yet to come.

The last poem of the book, “Up at the Palace,” by the Indian writer Gopal Sinagh, concludes the negative portrayal of the present state of arts and society. The poem is explicit in its social matter and does not hold any illusions about the present: the palace of the title is merely a setting where “sixty-eighty people died when a bomb went off” (2010, p. 78), in the city of Jaipur. The description of the city is thoroughly articulated throughout the five long stanzas of the poem. Playing with the national myths of the land and juxtaposing the elements of modernity, such as Champagne and Toyotas with images of temples and children asking for money, the poet becomes a quasi-*flâneur* of the underdeveloped nations. In the second stanza he even criticizes the idealistic view of India:

In the packed streets of Jaipur, in the rough
neighbourhoods, the parks and the tourists bits
of the pink city; while up at the city palace
a concert has been laid on for visitors –
ragas and Rameau under climbing stars. (2010, p. 78)

The vision of the city is translated in the image of the opulent, but at the same time, filthy palace. The references to the animals that are presented in the second stanza – and quoted below – serve to make the distinction between high and low forms of culture. In addition to that, it creates a parallel between the animal deities that are portrayed in marble in the third stanza, with the ones that are associated with unsanitary manners:

The poets tell us about rooms where blind
cockroaches skitter over vile linoleum,
rats in the kitchen, scorpions in the cracks,
the Ganges choked with filth of every kind

and frog-horns mourning from Kidderpore Docks;
 but we sip champagne, we nibble the wild ducks
 and follow the Maharani to the pavilion
 where a chamber orchestra is plucking strings. (2010, p. 78)

Extremely direct in the subject matter, the poet does not cease to describe, with a good dose of irony, the rampant consumerism of the Indian society. In order to validate his highly critical voice he evokes, in the fourth stanza the rule of Karma, which prevents people from rebelling against financial injustices: “the course of karma keeps them in their places/ gazing at lighted windows with rapt faces” (2010, p. 78). As an opposition to that, the poet, in a mocking tone, states that those people must have been greedy kings or debauched dancers in another life. In the next stanza, through a series of inquiries as regards the possibilities of what the poor must have been, the poet enigmatically answers that they have not done anything but to be born in a dream of shame “whose violent colours filled the universe” (2010, p. 78) and left them in silence, listening to the music of other spheres. It is likely that he is metaphorically mentioning the colonization process which promised a new enlightenment, but actually brought simply violence. However, with the independence process, what kind of personal affiliation would be more suitable for that kind of people – whose culture and social organization was utterly changed and deformed by violence? The final question echoes in its un-poetic bitterness: “but what do we worship now the gods have gone?” (2010, p. 79). As a final verse for the poem, it is related to the Indian post-colonial situations. Nevertheless, should I take into consideration that Mahon is Northern Irish and is indeed familiar with bombs going off in public places, the translation of the poem is not random, but a way to reflect about deeper and long term effects of the colonial process.

In conclusion, the whole book symbolically represents the contemporary state not simply of post-colonial societies – since Ireland presented features of post-colonial societies – but also of modernity and how it still keeps up with its promises of success. The gods from the question posed

in “Up in the Palace” are perhaps the myths of modernity – which Benjamin describes in *The Arcades Project* – or of the dialectics of Enlightenment as proposed by Theodor Adorno. All the same, economic crises demonstrate social collapses are not as farfetched as the post-modern enthusiasm had foreseen. In the same cycle, neither the economic growth of emerging markets. Thus, poetry and its *raison d’être*, in Mahon’s *Autumn Wind*, through the techniques of temporal displacement and cultural translation, engages itself in the task of remaining a metaphor of the ruin of the present.

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