

“All this debris of day-to-day experience”: The Poet as Rhythmanalyst in the Works of Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon

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Abstract

This article examines the work of three Irish poets, namely Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon, and particularly focuses on their poetic journals or journalistic poetry. The word “journal” bridges private and public discourses. Its root is the Latin *diurnālis*, pertaining to anything taking place “daily,” and thus to repetitive action, record-keeping or reporting carried out by private individuals in the form of a diary (Latin *diārium*), or to journalism contributing to public communications or discourse. To examine the poetic journals of these three writers, the article employs the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis to discuss the rhythmic, repetitive and changing processes of both poetry and the social and phenomenal experience.

Key words: Irish poetry, poetic discourse, place, space, journals

I

“I cannot believe [. . .] that any artist can be good who is not more than a bit of a reporting journalist,” W. H. Auden famously stated in his commentary on Herbert Reid’s work on P. B. Shelley (Auden 1996: 132). For Auden of the political 1930s, a poetic sensibility had to be balanced with the journalistic, with an engagement of the world of “news,” to be of genuine social *or* literary value. Louis MacNeice commended Auden for precisely this quality, for being “a journalist poet” though not “journalistic” (quoted in Stallworthy 1995: 227). MacNeice as well as many of his followers was well aware of the tightrope walk required for such balance, and the justification for poetic art in a society which appears to thrive on more utilitarian uses of language, and puts pressure on artists to act as interpreters and recorders of that which lies outside their work. In what follows, I will examine the works of three Irish poets, Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon, and their work that explores that tension between not only the artistic integrity of the individual poet and the surrounding society but also, and—more specifically—between poetic and journalistic uses of

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language. The word “journal” is itself one that bridges private and public discourses. Its root is the Latin *diurnālis*, pertaining to anything taking place “daily,” and thus to repetitive action, record-keeping or reporting carried out by private individuals in the form of a diary, latin *diārium*, or as journalism contributing to public communications or discourse. Its proximity to the word “journey,” from *diurnāta*, meaning a day’s time or a day’s work, further highlights how such record-keeping should be seen as a process rather than a closed narrative—the journal as journey is, by definition, an ongoing and unfinished undertaking.

Terence Brown quotes W. B. Yeats in his introduction to Derek Mahon’s *Journalism* (Brown 1996), a collection of the latter poet’s occasional prose writings; in a letter to Robert Bridges, Yeats was markedly apologetic not only when comparing a recent article and poetry, but even his text’s relationship with a more carefully considered essay, and asked that it not be judged “as you would judge an essay meant to be permanent. It is merely [. . .] journalism [. . .] and done more quickly than I would like” (Brown 1996: 13).¹ While the two poets differ considerably in their treatment of the everyday in poetry, Yeats’s views on a certain ephemeral nature of journalism are not dissimilar to those of Louis MacNeice, whose introductory note to his *Autumn Journal* explains how he was “writing what I have called a Journal. In a journal or a personal letter a man writes what he feels at the moment” (MacNeice 1979: 101). Similarly, the jacket blurb of Muldoon’s *The Prince of the Quotidian*, referred to as his “January Journal,” notes how the volume emerged after the poet’s resolution to write “a poem each day” for a month, a process markedly distinct from his usual, slower pace of poetic composition.² Derek Mahon, again in a similar strain, quotes Cyril Connolly, for whom “[l]iterature is the art of writing something that will be read twice,” whereas “journalism is what will be grasped at once,” and that “a magazine, even such a first rate one as [Cyril Connolly’s] *Horizon*, is of its nature ephemeral,” (quoted in Haughton 1979: 269, 274). In other words, the format of the journal appears to

¹ On Yeats’s relationship with the everyday, and his dismissal of the “journalistic” in poetic craft, see Charles I. Armstrong 2013: 13-26.

² In the Arts Lives RTÉ documentary *Paul Muldoon—Atlantic Man*, the poet says: “I write very little. I write maybe a dozen poems a year. Every three or four years there are forty or fifty of them. And that’s a book” (*Atlantic Man*: n. pag.).

require the speeding up of the processes of poetry, and allows for a more transitory or oscillating glance of the surrounding world than the denser and more carefully crafted forms of lyric expression.

Consequently, the present essay seeks to examine the ways in which the three poets have shared certain preoccupations over the significance of poetry in contemporary society in general and, more specifically, to understand how the rhythms and ruptures of the everyday may connect with those of poetry—or how poetry may respond to them. In the works discussed below such connections are seen, in turn, to either compromise or to reaffirm the value of poetic expression. And while critics have often been more reserved in their praise when comparing the longer and more journalistic works of these poets with their more condensed lyrics (with the notable exception of MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*), or at least more carefully or solicitously crafted verse, they occupy a critical place in their production as texts concerned with the processes connecting poetry with the social and the phenomenal. To look at the three Northern Irish poets' preoccupation with the everyday also veers away from the paradigm of art and poetry versus politics which for a long time dominated any scholarly discussion of poetry's engagement with its historical and social contexts in Ireland's North. As Charles I. Armstrong has already argued in his essay on everyday epiphanies in contemporary Northern Irish poetry, in recent years an engagement with the quotidian, or "a sense of day-to-day normality or business as usual [has] frequently presented [. . .] a salutary alternative to the unpredictable violence of the Troubles" (Armstrong 2011: 125).

The following discussion on the relationship between the everyday and the poetic in the work of MacNeice, Mahon and Muldoon will also draw on the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, more particularly, on what was to remain his final published volume, *Rythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (originally published in French as *Éléments de rythmanalyse*, 1992), Lefebvre's fourth contribution to the series *Critique of Everyday Life*, (begun as early as the 1940s). Though he is better known for the landmark work *The Production of Space*, and its outlining of spatial practices and representations, it is Lefebvre's work on the coming together of the temporal and the spatial in *Rythmanalysis* which will inform this reading of the poetic journals, inasmuch as it particularly well enables an understanding of poetry as not distinct from, but part of the processes of

personal and social experience. Rhythm, an integral part of poetic discourse as employed in the works of the three poets appears particularly suited, I would suggest, for an investigation of the relationship between aesthetics of a verbal art and its perpetual dialogue with the non-poetic, everyday domain.

Lefebvre's analysis of rhythms and repetitions connects with the work of other twentieth century French philosophers of space and spatial practices. His views on social control exercised through what he called "dressage," or the imposition of organised rhythms and patterns on human life, echoes Michel Foucault's views on spatial control; similarly, his awareness of practices of freedom and creation within such systems of control are not dissimilar to those of Michel de Certeau's "tactics" of everyday life, working from bottom-up to resist top-down or "strategic" exercise of social authority.³ In short, these left-wing thinkers have typically viewed the category of the everyday through the dialectics of power and authority, versus freedom or resistance, fixed forms of control versus the possibility of subversion. For the Lefebvre of *Rhythmanalysis*, both power and freedom have their rhythms, and it is the task of the rhythm analyst to be attentive to the rhythmic "noises" and "silences" of the body as well as the world outside it, of individual actions as well as various structures of law and commerce (Lefebvre 2004: 19-20). It is the tension between repetition and difference in the rhythms of everyday life that allows for the poetic (in the sense of the Greek *poiēsis*, making or creating)—for Lefebvre:

no rhythm without repetition in time and space [. . .]. But there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely. Whence the relation between repetition and difference. When it concerns the everyday, rites, ceremonies, fêtes, rules and laws,

³ Derek Schilling has pointed out how the emergence of the everyday in post-World War II French philosophy has in recent years been keenly adopted by scholars in the English speaking academic world, where the "cultural turn" has proved a fruitful ground for a category which "allow[s] for a rehabilitation of ordinary practice while precluding the wholesale reinstatement of anthropocentrism" and helps circumvent some of "the limits of language-based paradigms." At the same time, he highlights that the everyday was by no means a predominant paradigm in the thought of this period, as philosophers were generally more focused on "the legacy of phenomenology on the one hand and structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis on the other" (Schilling 2003: 23-24).

there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference. (Lefebvre 2004: 6)

The observing of rhythms also blends the spatial and the temporal, or makes it possible to observe places through temporal experience “[the rythmanalyst] makes himself more sensitive to times than to spaces. He will come to ‘listen’ to the house, a street, a town” (Lefebvre 2004: 22). In other words, the experience of places and phenomena must be understood as certain temporal fluxes, and nothing in the material world escapes the transforming, yet repetitive impact of rhythmic change: “An apparently immobile *object*, the forest, moves in multiple ways: the combined movements of the soil, the earth, the sun. Or the movements of the molecules and atoms that compose it” (Lefebvre 2004: 20). Marjorie Perloff has similarly commented on the use of repetition in poetry, and stressed how “repetition in the continuous present [. . .] assures difference, for no repetition, whether of word or deed, can ever produce an exact replica of a now lost original” (Perloff 2002: 183). The format of a poetic journal, in its registering of the rhythms of the everyday through the rhythms of poetic form, is particularly suited for exploring the patterns of the quotidian domain through literary language. In the journals of MacNeice, Mahon and Muldoon, the negotiation between the sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic variations between repetition and difference in the poetic and the non-poetic, and also the verbal and the non-verbal, is a consciously adopted strategy in attempting to understand the complex and somewhat labyrinthine interrelationship between life and poetry.

II

Autumn Journal, as MacNeice informs his reader in the prefatory note to the sequence, was written “from August 1938 until the New Year,” a time during which Britain and Ireland, with the rest of Europe, were increasingly coming to terms with the possibility of another war (MacNeice 1979: 101). MacNeice’s ambition was, in the autumn of 1938, to produce a longer autobiographical poetic work, which, Jon Stallworthy writes, “would admit the impurities of the world, the flux of experience, in a documentary form that, for all its seeming spontaneity, would be directed into patterns on a page—as images on film—by the invisible imagination” (Stallworthy 1995: 228). The everyday rhythms of

the poem are thus constantly measured against a crisis disrupting quotidian routine, or threatening the sense of security that such routine might signify. As well as such alterations of routine and emergency or exception, the poem is preoccupied with the role of art and poetry in describing these processes, and the possibility of their efficacy in a time of crisis. At the same time, the poem's wider historical perspective is measured against another state of exception, that of the ending love affair between MacNeice and Nancy Coldstream; a personal crisis mirrors the looming historical upheavals.

The MacNeice of *Autumn Journal* explores the concreteness and singularity of experience, while repeating the diurnal cycles and rhythms of everyday life: meals, urban transport, newspapers, radio, telephones, routines of factory workers and industrial production both follow and create such rhythms, and are constantly interrupted and modified by that which is extraordinary and distinctive. As Edna Longley puts it, the journalism of *Autumn Journal* relies on "everydayness turning strange" (Longley 1988: 63). MacNeice's familiarity with Greek philosophy, most notably Plato, Aristotle and Heraclitus, impacts his observation of these processes, but does not lead to the adoption of an abstract, philosophical perspective above the level of everyday experience, any more than any preference of the purely aesthetic is allowed to supersede the messy confusions of life. This is consistent with the poet's long-held beliefs on the relationship between life and art. As he noted in a letter to Anthony Blunt in 1926, "I don't believe in pure anything. Anything pure is an abstraction. All concretes are adulterated" (quoted in Walker 2009: 204). Rhythm and repetition, however, allow the poet to perceive patterns in the flow of observed phenomena, and thus also help negotiate the dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete.

The observed rhythms of the sequence are replicated in the formal aspects of the poem, like in its use of the "elastic kind of quatrain," as the poet himself called it (quoted in Stallworthy 1995: 233), the almost exhausting repetition of lines beginning with "and," and the extensive use of lists. As Neil Corcoran has observed, "repetition at the formal or technical level can be thematically functional in MacNeice," and also becomes "one way of defying what his work frequently finds repetitively wearying in the actual, inevitable repetitions of living" (Corcoran 2009: 216, 221). In much of MacNeice's poetry, repetition allows for formal control and questioning, as well as the employment of an almost musical

patterning which helps keep in tension the forces of fixity and flux in his verse, or, as the poet himself put it, help “impos[e] on flux an architectonic” (quoted in Corcoran 2009: 223). Rhythm and repetition in MacNeice thus have many, sometimes mutually contradictory, manifestations, signifying entrapment, monotony and claustrophobia as well as poetry’s potential for a certain kind of subversive vitality. Corcoran draws attention to “[. . .] the brilliant repetitiveness of the rhetoric of ‘Autumn Journal’ with its hammering polysyndeton—the word ‘And’ repeated propulsively again and again and again” and notes how “in ‘Autumn Journal,’ history makes poetry happen. In that poem the time itself is link and rivet as MacNeice’s journal, and journalistic, dailiness of a London both claustrophobic and exhilarating is darkly shadowed by looming European catastrophe” (221). The rhythms of everyday London as simultaneously “claustrophobic” and “exhilarating” are expressed both formally and thematically. It is the use of repetition specifically which makes it possible for MacNeice to reflect on the tensions between “journalistic dailiness” and varying degrees of difference, and artistic or literary creation. Repetition, in other words, signifies both that which is monotonous and the possibility of breaking away from its force field, not through aesthetic detachment but through the constant process of encounter and change between poetic discourse and the world with which it connects. In *Autumn Journal* repetitive monotony, “The reflex action or dog or sheep / Being enough for normal avocations / And life rotating in an office sleep / As long as things are normal” (MacNeice 1979: 121), is modified through the energies inherent in the repetitions, “the rhythm which the intercrossing / Coloured waters permanently give” (135).

Michael Moir suggests that Henri Lefebvre’s distinction between “representational spaces” and “representations of space” (as outlined in *The Production of Space*) as characterised by top-down authoritative control versus lived, imaginatively conceived creativity, help understand MacNeice’s engagement with religious authority, and religious spaces (Moir 2012: n. pag.), as well as other forms of embodied, ideological control. These perspectives seem to be harder to distinguish in *Autumn Journal*, however, which draws its energy from the interplay of rhythm and repetition as monotony or exercise of political or commercial structures of power, and of the patterns discerned in the plurality of “lived” experience in pre-war London. Here, the poet is situated not quite

in a “lonely centre from which to launch didactic and other excursions,” as Edna Longley says of his shorter lyrics, but is embedded within the field of perception and pattern from which the poem grows through “a series of links that evolve into a great chain” (Longley 1988: 61, 66). It is such a centre that Lefebvre’s rhythm analyst occupies: “The rhythm analyst will not be obliged to *jump* from the inside to the outside of observed *bodies*; he should come to listen to them *as a whole* and unify them by taking his own rhythms as a reference: by integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa”; “he must simultaneously catch a rhythm and perceive it within the whole, in the same way as non-analysts, people, *perceive* it. He must arrive at the *concrete* through experience” (Lefebvre 2004: 20-21, his emphases).

The journal as daily record also allows MacNeice to perceive details and rhythms accumulatively through the rhythms of the calendar days, weeks and months. A specific date, relying on the “public” rhythming of everyday experience through the calendar in Lefebvre, is both dependent on repeatable structures, signs and symbols of a calendar year, and the importance of discerning any specific date from others. The concepts of weeks, months and years are based on rhythmic patterning of time, a dynamic acknowledged by MacNeice, who approaches it through a questioning of Platonic philosophy:

For me there remain to all intents and purposes
Seven days in the week
And no one Tuesday is another and you destroy it
If you subtract the difference and relate
It merely to the Form of Tuesday. This is Tuesday
The 25th of October, 1938. (MacNeice 1979: 124)

Here, *Autumn Journal* echoes the 1933 poem “Sunday Morning,” which similarly questions whether one can “abstract this day and make it to the week of time,” though the earlier poem’s Sunday is discussed as a “self-contained” instant of illusory time outside, rather than as a part of, the repetitions of the weekdays (MacNeice 1979: 23). The existence of any “Form of Tuesday,” as an unchanging form, is challenged by MacNeice’s preference of Aristotelian, but even more poignantly, Heraclitean thought, which refuses the certainty of fixed form and acknowledges that “we cannot make any corner in life or in life’s beauty, / That no river is a river which does not flow” (MacNeice 1979: 102). It

is through rhythm and repetition that we understand the concept of Tuesday while telling one Tuesday apart from another.

The operations of society and commerce, the business as usual of everyday trade and communication, also seek to absorb any specific crises threatening such processes, perhaps most poignantly through mass media: as Lefebvre notes in his chapter on “The Media Day,” “[p]roducers of the commodity information know empirically how to utilize rhythms. They have cut up time; they have broken it up into *hourly slices*” (Lefebvre 2004: 48, Lefebvre’s emphasis). In *Autumn Journal* their role in accessing events outside the immediate field of experience is also constantly underlined. For Lefebvre, the mechanised rhythms of mass media seek to erase that which is exceptional (or singular or unique) in life, as it seeks to present its content as a commodity (Lefebvre 2004: 50). The singular, as reported through mass media, taking place in a location other than its representation, is rendered, if not meaningless, at least lacking in the subtlety and substance, or the complexities of immediate experience. The pre-World War II crises threatening MacNeice’s London are a part of a routine which will go on regardless of valuable news content: “[. . .] Newsboys driving a roaring business, / The flapping paper snatched to see / If anything has, or has not, happened” (MacNeice 1979: 116). Even those moments in the media day which should signify a break from the routine become a part of a mechanised experience that fails to break free from the operations of the media market place: “They are selling and buying the late / Special editions snatched and read abruptly / Beneath the electric signs as crude as Fate” (MacNeice 1979: 109).

In section XXI the poet explicitly questions not only the ultimate value of everyday life but also of aesthetic and artistic practice:

And when we clear away
All this debris of day-to-day experience,
What comes out to light, what is there of value
Lasting from day-to-day?
I sit in my room in comfort
Looking at enormous flowers—
Equipment purchased with my working hours,
A daily mint of perishable petals.
The figures of the dance repeat
The unending cycle of making and spending money,
Eating our daily bread in order to earn it

And earning in order to eat.
And is that all the story,
The mainspring and the plot,
Or merely a mechanism without which not
Any story could be written? (MacNeice 1979: 143).

The repetition of the phrase “day-to-day” and its rhyming with the “away,” in the first line of the section, underlines the anxiety motivating these lines: when the more trivial concerns with mundane existence are “cleared away,” what is it that will sustain us, and poetry, from one day to the next? The repeated words thus assume an alternative meaning depending on context, signifying the ephemeral quotidian or the everyday on the one hand, and, on the other, the process of time which will ultimately test that which retains its value in the midst of the “debris” of modern life. Furthermore, the contrast between “dance” and “unending cycle” set the rhythms of art against the mundane and numbing repetitions of a mechanised, commercial society. Here MacNeice interrogates the dynamics between the quotidian and the literary or the aesthetic, and the rhythm and repetition manifested in the “figure” of dance, or in the cyclical dynamics of production and consumption. In short, *Autumn Journal*’s constant interweaving of the rhythmic repetitions of the everyday, of commerce, industry, media and political systems with MacNeice’s belief in the vitality of poetic language, its own oscillation between rhythmic repetition and difference in responding to these systems results in poetry which is part of the society around it, yet not subservient to its more functional processes. “Like the poet,” writes Lefebvre, “the rhythm analyst performs a verbal action, which has an aesthetic import. The poet concerns himself above all with words, the verbal. Whereas the rhythm analyst concerns himself with temporalities and their relations with wholes” (Lefebvre 2004: 24) in *Autumn Journal*, the poet becomes the rhythm analyst.

III

Unlike the two other poets discussed in this essay, Derek Mahon does not explicitly set out to write a journal or diary in poetic form. Nevertheless, his first two collections after *Antarctica* (1985), namely *The Hudson Letter* (1996) and *The Yellow Book* (1997) mark a shift in poetic style from “the high formalist thing” towards “finding some of the

values of free verse” (quoted in Haughton 2007: 225), and also a development of what Haughton characterises as “a dialogical monologue in continuous, discursive style, cast in a tonally unstable idiom that is often cacophonous, inelegant, and prosaic” (Haughton 2007: 226). As Haughton goes on to argue, in *The Hudson Letter*, Mahon, repeatedly drawing on Yeats, also sets himself apart from the canonical Irish poet’s project: “Yeats insisted on the gap between the poet and the man ‘sitting down at the breakfast table,’ while Mahon seeks to establish the rapport between them, the breakfast voice and ‘dream / of redemptive form’” (Haughton 2007: 244). I will here focus on the latter of the two collections, however, as it was, as Haughton observes, the one the poet composed while Mahon was compiling his edited collection of *Journalism* (Mahon 1995), and in which he attempted to “combine poetry and journalism” (Haughton 2007: 269)—with the different sections of the volume repeatedly referring back to Mahon’s journalistic pieces.

The Yellow Book, just as *Autumn Journal*, negotiates between the personal and the more social or communal sense of the word “journal,” and finds its register half way between the autobiographical mode of a diary and a record or public discourse. The volume was preceded by the writings Mahon collected in his notebook (titled “Scrapbook 1996-1997” in the Emory archives), which, Haughton argues, shows that the work was designed as “an architectural whole,” despite its apparent structuring around “quickly written notes” (Haughton 2007: 271). The tension between the public and the personal is recognised by Mahon in the reference to Edmund Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle*, in a section with the same name; for Wilson, it was “the private imagination in isolation from the life of society” which propelled the writing of modernists like Yeats, Eliot and Joyce (quoted in Haughton 2007: 270). Such isolation becomes somewhat more poignant and less creatively attuned in the era of new media technology, however, as these media, designed to facilitate the interaction between individuals, are seen to serve no purpose other than their own impersonal functioning; in the *fin-de-siècle* twentieth century society, “computer talks to computer, machine to answering machine” (Mahon 2011: 198). And if Mahon considers *Autumn Journal* as expressing “the most extraordinary visual and tactile sense of the period” of the late 1930s (Mahon 1996: 22-23), *The Yellow Book* similarly registers the ethos of late twentieth century Dublin through an immersion

in the details of its parks, streets and buildings. It also reflects Mahon's attempt to address, through poetic language, the discrepancy between practical "uselessness," as David G. Williams calls it, of artistic endeavor, and the culture of "sensationalism" and "instant gratification" which characterises the contemporary condition, and a re-negotiation of "the artistic tension between emotion and form" (Williams 1999: 115). *The Yellow Book* is a modernist poem on postmodern culture: Mahon's densely referential style developed in the 1990s and the mix of "idioms and voices from a variety of sources—commercial, demotic, journalistic and literary" (Williams 1999: 112) may address a condition and aesthetics which is characteristic of the late twentieth century urban culture. However, underneath there is always a sense of absence, nostalgia and loss of faith.

Mahon also shares both MacNeice's and Muldoon's concern over the role and value of poetry, seen under pressure from the monotony and banalities of everyday life and the mechanical and consumerist impulses of the late twentieth century postmodern society. In lines not entirely dissimilar to MacNeice's quoted above, Mahon expresses concern over the value of poetry and art in the postmodern consumer society:

What, in our new world, have we left to say?
Oh, poets can eat now, painters can buy paint
but have we nobler poetry, happier painting
than when the gutters bubbled, the drains stank
and hearts bobbed to the clappers in the sanctuary? (Mahon 2011: 202)

While MacNeice's poem remains, for the most part, in the simple present tense, Mahon's more nostalgic melancholia constantly slips into past tense in expressing a distaste for the "pastiche paradise of the postmodern" (Mahon 2011: 202). Mahon's varied and flexible use of iambic pentameter and rhyme similarly serves a purpose similar to MacNeice's "elastic quatrains"—they act as a way of alternating rhythm with occasional rupture, and balancing pattern with the uneven flood of experiences the poet is seeking to record.

Rhythms of the body, of nature and of modern technology are constantly measured against each other in Mahon's 1990s poetry. In *The Hudson Letter* the city's sounds include "the plaintive, desolate cab-horns on Madison and 5th: / and [. . .] Daisy Cunard's nightingale," "the first bird and the first garbage truck" (Haughton 2007: 276), and the

poet/speaker is engaged in the routines of the everyday, punctuated by the real and imagined intrusions of media and the natural world: “I make coffee and listen for the news at eight; but first the nightingale” (Mahon 2011: 162). In *The Yellow Book*, the poet situates “night thoughts” in the moment when “we lie smoking between three and four / before the first bird and the first tour bus” (Mahon 2011: 195). Natural sounds, especially those made by a bird with such strong symbolic connotations with artistic inspiration as the nightingale, participate in the cyclical rhythms of night and day.

Mahon’s isolated artist/philosopher observes the rhythms of the world around him from a spatial distance, from the “attic room” of “Night Thoughts,” “Axels Castle” and “Smoke,” Elizabeth Bowen’s imagined observing of early morning Dublin in “At the Shelbourne,” to the German philosopher’s tenement “up there above the promenade” in “Schopenhauer’s Day.” For Henri Lefebvre’s “rhythmanalyst,” such a distance may be necessary to perceive the dynamic movements he seeks to understand:

In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely: be it through illness or technology [. . .]. A balcony does the job admirably, in relation to the street, and it is to this putting into perspective (of the street) that we owe the marvellous invention of balconies [. . .]. In the absence of which you could content yourself with a window, on the condition that it does not overlook a somber corner or a gloomy internal courtyard. (Lefebvre 2004: 27-28)

Where MacNeice of *Autumn Journal* situates the solitary speaker in the midst of the plethora or phenomena addressed in the poem, Mahon’s existential outsider has placed himself in the margin. The trope of a view from a window, or a room above the street life of the urban setting is by no means a new one for Mahon; in the earlier “Rage for Order” (*Lives* 1972), for example, the poet is positioned outside the world perceived below, “the fitful glare / Of his high window is as / Nothing to our scattered glass” (Mahon 2011: 47).

The two first sections of *The Yellow Book*, “Night Thoughts” and “Axel’s Castle,” place the decadent poet in his studio by Dublin’s Fitzwilliam Square, with a view across the street into the park in the middle of the Georgian buildings. The poet’s quest for inspiration reaches out to the natural life of the park, to the history of the square, and locations and literary works in temporal or geographical distance. In

“Night Thoughts,” the time of day is first specified as “between three and four” in the morning, and the season as April, but, as the poem moves on, the time shifts to morning and the season to “November,” and memory intrudes by taking the speaker to childhood “Co. Antrim or Co. Down.” The temporal and spatial disorientation is echoed by the poem’s constant change of register between lyrical harmony and prosaic discord, and between nostalgia and present-day harsh reality; from the exaggerated iambic sway of “My attic window under the shining slates / where maids slept in the days of Wilde and Yeats,” or “Sententious solitude, ancient memory, night / and silence, nobody here, but even as I night-write / blind in a bedside notebook,” the poet moves, without missing a beat (or at least an end-rhyme) to “crane light where the ‘construction industry’ / throws up new office blocks against the sky,” and “Never mind the new world order and the bus tours.”

Temporally and spatially, both “Night Thoughts” and “Axel’s Castle” move between present day, remembered past (childhood), and the historical narratives of the turn of the twentieth century, between different times of day (night-time between three and four, early morning, day, nightfall/“dusk.” Experiences of media and technology are repeatedly referred to as signifiers of the ails of present-day society or the more pleasant visions of the past, in line with Fred Davis’s characterisation of nostalgia, “The Beautiful Past and the Unattractive Present” (Davis 1979: 18). The rhythms of present-day Dublin, its commuters, tourist buses appearing at regular intervals, and daytime business where “computer talks to computer, machine to answering machine,” are phenomena which keep the poet in his studio from hearing his own thoughts; he prefers “[n]ight thoughts” (Mahon 2011: 195) and “night/and silence” (196), as daylight business hours hinder creativity: “Only at dusk Athene’s owl will fly” (197).⁴ Night-time opens room for silence required for memory and nostalgic reflection. Of the present-day outside world, only the park of Fitzwilliam’s square, the walled enclosure of nature, allows the poet to find rhythms which inspire rather than disturb. But even the rhythms of nature are buried under man-made

⁴ Here, the Gallery Press edition of *The Yellow Book* and the later version published in *New Collected Poems* in 2011 differ. In the first version of the poem, we have the more direct Hegelian reference is to “Minerva’s owl,” representing the owl accompanying Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, signifying historical wisdom in hindsight for the German idealist.

noise, as “[T]he first bird” coincides with the arrival of tourists and traffic; the “first of dawn [which] whitens a locked park, lilac and hawthorn / dripping in wintry peace,” but “crocus, daffodil” are followed by “air brake and diesel/chug” (Mahon 2011: 195). It is the leaving of tourists and nine-to-five commuters which makes the poet’s imagination reach out across the street, where “Beyond the iron railings and the little gate / perhaps a fox stirs, and dead leaves conflate / in a dried-up fountain crisp packet and matchbox.”⁵ Now, the park reaches the poet’s imagination, and he allows it into his room: “dead leaves up here too, lamplight night and day.” The alternation between day and night, light and darkness, the present and the past, and the intrusion of visible and audible reality versus the remembered or imagined elsewhere (in “Axel’s Castle,” he refers to the famous armchair traveller Des Esseintes) rhythm the poet’s life and creative efforts. For Lefebvre, the view from above allows for the discerning of “diurnal rhythms” and reveals how regular rhythms and repetitions characterise the day, at night-time, however, “arrhythmia reigns” (Lefebvre 2004: 30-31). It is this irregularity and unpredictability of the night-time, its independence of the rhythmic, mechanic, functions of society which appears to give Mahon’s nostalgic poet the possibility of his melancholy creativity; Mahon’s *recueillement* thus requires temporal as well as spatial distance from the daily rhythms of the city.

Mahon’s estranged decadent may leave his poems open to the criticism of Caren Kaplan, who, in *Questions of Travel*, characterises modernist exile as a celebration of “singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation, and aestheticised excision of location in favour of locale—that is, the ‘artist in exile’ is never ‘at home,’ always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insights” (Kaplan 1996: 28). Mahon’s views could be seen to be characterised by nostalgic indulgence, romanticised cosmopolitanism, aesthetic detachment and ahistorical individualism. His *fin-de-siècle* aesthete may revisit the tropes linking the modernist exile with the postmodern traveller, both equally separating themselves,

⁵ Mahon’s poetry has repeatedly been attracted to the life of discarded things, famously in “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” or the sonnet “The Mute Phenomena,” where the poet asks “What do you know / Of the revolutionary theories advanced / By turnips, or the sex life of cutlery,” and claims that “[a]lready in a lost hubcap is conceived / The ideal society” (Mahon 2011: 76).

Kaplan stresses, from the social and material realities of the places they occupy. Mahon is, however, markedly ironic about his own sense of nostalgia, like in section XI, “At the Chelsea Art Club,” where he concedes that he may be “finally turning into an old fart” (rather sardonically rhymed with “art” in the following line) (Mahon 2011: 214). And importantly, as Haughton notes in his discussion of section XIX, “On the automation of the Irish Lights,” “The poet’s sense of desolation at the automation is part of his broader response to the encroachment of new technology” (Haughton 2007: 306): it is specifically the lack of human agency in the late twentieth century context which troubles Mahon.

IV

Muldoon’s *The Prince of the Quotidian*, one of those interim collections, which the poet has mostly published with Gallery Press, rather than Faber and Faber, takes up from the season where MacNeice concluded his long poem, the beginning of a new year; the jacket blurb acknowledges MacNeice as precedent in calling the volume “January Journal,” a record in poetic form of a single winter month in 1992. The 31 poems, 12 of which are sonnets, are set in New Jersey and the surrounding east coast U.S., with intermittent intrusions of remembered or imagined Ireland. The collection’s date of publication coincides with that of *The Annals of Chile*, the poet’s first Faber collection, fully registering his relocation in the U.S., and would prefigure the writing of suburban America into his 1998 collection *Hay*.

Like MacNeice and Mahon, Muldoon’s journal expresses a slight trepidation with the interrelationship between poetry and the mundane contexts out of which it emerges, and which it attempts to weave into a meaningful literary composition. The medium of a poetic journal itself is, again, an embodiment of such concerns, an interface between the world of the distilled lyric and everyday experience. But, while the poems of MacNeice and Mahon, despite their division into numbered or titled sections, are formally closer to long poems, and register the experience of the surrounding world in structured but flexible flowing, more narrative verse, Muldoon’s *Prince* adopts the form of a sequence—or “diary sequence” as Clair Wills calls it—with its sonnets and short lyrics, despite a certain amount of narrative glue between the poems. At the

same time, it is the embeddedness in the everyday, Wills points out, which separates the diary from Muldoon's other collections, as the journal engages with "'quotidian' encounters, events and actions, as well as exploring everyday rhythms of speech and thought" (Wills 1998: 161). These rhythms of "speech and thought" are negotiated through the rhythmic patterns of poetic form itself, in Muldoon's use of "traditional verse forms such as sonnets, terza rima, couplets and so on," and the apparently nonchalant language of the poems allows words and expressions to fall into a technically complex yet seemingly effortless, chiming pattern (Wills 1998: 161).

Formally, it thus seeks to negotiate the relationship between the intensity of lyric moments of epiphany, and the contexts outside the realm of poetry from which those moments might arise; but as Armstrong stresses, in this volume "transcendence is rendered acutely problematical" (Armstrong 2011: 117). The practice of "versifying," of composing poetry and finding rhyme, positions the poet in an intersection between the perceived non-verbal world and the verbally constructed realm of a poem, and is addressed in the nineteenth poem; here, the extensive use of quotation marks underlines the act of creating as an act of selecting and attempting to find the appropriate diction to "expand" on what is already there:

Not for nothing would I versify
'The Alchemist and Barrister', rhyme (pace Longley) 'cat'
with 'dog', expand on the forsythia
that graces our back door: 'humdrum', 'inadequate',

'inconsequential journalese', 'a klieg light
masquerading as the moon'; none will,
I trust, look for pattern in this crazy quilt
where all is random, 'all so trivial' (Muldoon 1994: 29)

"Not for nothing," the speaker tells us, but the double negative of "Not for nothing" already raises doubt over whether "nothing" could become "something." Why rhyme "cat" with "dog," or "expand," through poetic expression, on the phenomena of the natural world of suburbia? The rhymes and rhythms of poetry in Muldoon's sequence seem less interlaced with repeated rhythms perceived in quotidian existence than something which might—or indeed might not—render the apparent triviality of that setting worthy of poetry. In *The Prince of the Quotidian*,

rhythmic repetition in everyday life is suggested rather than enacted formally in the poems: the long lists and reverberations of MacNeice and Mahon make way for single mentions of breakfasts, dinners, drives and evenings watching television, which seem to stand for, rather than embody, through repetition, a life of mundane, recurring events. At the same time, the “crazy quilt” stands for both the experienced quotidian surroundings addressed in the poem and the text of the poems themselves. The off-hand remark, “none will, I trust, look for pattern,” conveys both a simultaneous hesitance over the significance, or not, of converting such experience into poetic language and form, and a challenge to Muldoon’s readers who, by the mid-1990s, would have been accustomed to scanning Muldoon’s collections for elaborate configurations of metre and rhyme. But the images and short threads contributing to the larger fabric of the poems may not be enough to keep it together; such doubts are expressed through an accusing voice in the 30th poem:

I look out the kitchen window. A cigarette burns
 In the midst of the pyracanthus:
 ‘What’s with you, *a mhic*?
 Apart from the ‘eel-grass and bladderwrack’

There’s not an image here that’s worth a fuck.
 Who gives a shit about the dreck
 of your life? Who gives a toss
 about your tossing off?’ (Muldoon 1994: 40)

The distinctively Irish idiom, with the vocative “*a mhic*,” specifically draws attention to the distinction between the intensely inscribed, literary landscape of Ireland, and the apparent triviality of the imagery available in suburban America; the exceptions of “eel-grass and bladderwrack” are also imports from Ireland, referring to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s collection *Feis*, mentioned in a previous poem. As Wills highlights, the diary sequence associates triviality with the everyday life in New Jersey, whereas “news” of deeper significance are of Irish origin. The global culture of media and commodification which rhythm everyday existence through entertainment and commerce is, in *The Prince of the Quotidian*, set against the rhythms of poetic discourse—Wills here quotes Wallace Stevens’s “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (Wills 1998:

160). Lefebvre echoes such a dynamic in “The Media Day,” where he notes that the fragmenting and rhythmic effects of mass media can be seen as oppositional to creativity as a form of subjective freedom: “The present is a fact and an effect of *commerce*; while presence situates itself in the poetic: value, creation, situation in the world and not only in the relations of exchange” (Lefebvre 2004: 47). Lefebvre’s “poetic” is here more akin to the Greek *poiēsis*, making or creating, rather than the aesthetics of a verbal art form, but his ideas of the illusory, commodified “present” of the media and “presence” as an opening for creative and situational response also characterise Muldoon’s poetic concerns in *The Prince*—can poetry meaningfully engage with the here and now in the midst of global media culture, which, at least superficially, allows access to any place, any time?

The voice of section 30 is identified as that of the ubiquitous talking horse or “horse-head” of Muldoon’s *oeuvre*, in the final poem of the sequence; this is the voice that, in “Gathering Mushrooms” (*Quoof*, 1983), “spoke this verse: / [. . .] *If sing you must, let your song / tell of treading your own dung, let straw and dung give a spring to your step*” (Muldoon 2001: 106). *Quoof*, the collection registering the troubled liaison between poetry, the body and their political functions during Northern Ireland’s hunger strikes, stands in stark contrast with the middle class comforts of *The Prince of the Quotidian*; in the final stanzas of the latter collection:

the horse head folds his horse-hide parachute
till it’s no bigger than a glove:

he slaps my cheek; ‘Above all else, you must atone
for everything you’ve said and done

against your mother: meet excess of love
with excess of love; begin the Feast of Saint Brigid.’ (Muldoon 1994: 41)

The presence of Brigid Muldoon, which dominates *The Annals of Chile*, enters the collection on the eve of February 1st, St Brigid’s Day, brought by the horse-head which now parachutes itself into New Jersey. The demand for a personal and cultural sense of responsibility, or “atonement,” with the half-playful slap of a cheek bridges the flippant quotidian and the painfully profound, as well as the geographical-temporal distance between memory and actuality. In Muldoon’s poetry,

the actual and/or phenomenal, rather than crystallising itself in transcendental epiphanies, is usually absorbed into the larger, rhythmised cyclical patterns of his poetic *oeuvre*, or as Fran Brearton notes, into one “Great Wheel” (Brearton 2004: 45).

While the full centripetal pull of that wheel does not quite reach *The Prince of the Quotidian*, it haunts its engagement with the mundane quotidian realm; rhythm and rhyme are in this collection the makings of poetry, rather than part of the at times tedious repetitiveness of the everyday embedded in the journals of MacNeice and Mahon. If, as Wills notes, there is a risk of “over-reading” *The Prince*, which “is for the most part a light, even slight work” (Wills 1998: 167), it is specifically this tightrope walk, the simple registering of the mundane on the one hand and, on the other, its “over-reading,” which aligns the concerns of the collection with those of the two older poets.

V

“Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm,” Lefebvre contends (Lefebvre 2004: 15). The poet as rhythm analyst is immersed in this interaction, but is also cognisant of its consequences to his own art, certainly in the journalistic works discussed above, as they immerse themselves in the specific loci of pre-war London, fin-de-siècle Dublin, and suburban New Jersey. All three poets explicitly express, in their journals and “journalistic” writing, a preoccupation with the relationship between poetry, or poetic expression, and the more quotidian concerns. MacNeice seeks for that which could be of lasting value in the midst of the “debris of day-to-day experience.” Mahon’s existential anxieties relate to the apparent superficiality of late 20th century society as he asks “[w]hat, in our new world, have we left to say?” Muldoon’s doubts, typically worded through an act of poetic ventriloquism, are expressed by the accusing voice of the horse-head, for whom “[t]here is not an image here that’s worth a fuck.” In all of the texts discussed above, the interrelationship between self, poetry and the world also carries to poetic form, and to the use of rhythm and repetition in expressing, challenging and transforming the rhythmic and repetitive elements of everyday life and the surrounding society. The form of the poetic journal, its connotations with the recording of daily events and with

autobiographical expression, as well as its somewhat ephemeral nature in relation to the more carefully crafted, condensed lyric, is adopted as a medium especially suited for describing the processes through which poetry emerges.

For Lefebvre, rhythm as an overall term can bring together seemingly disparate elements and phenomena of experience and society, and rhythmanalysis should take into account both the exercise of power and control, as well as acts of resistance; between these lie the small scale encounters of everyday life, of systems of transport, news broadcasts and meal times. The repeated references to poetry or the poetic in Lefebvre's work underline that creative element of the Greek *poiēsis*, an act of imaginative engagement with the world. Lefebvre's rhythmanalyst

seems close to the poet, or the man of the theatre. Art, poetry, music and theatre have always brought something [. . .] to the everyday. They have reflected on it. The creator descended to the streets of the city-state [. . .] they assumed city life. The rhythmanalyst could, in the long term, attempt something analogous: works [oeuvres] might return to and intervene in the everyday. (Lefebvre 2004: 25).

Addressing the processes of life or poetry through rhythms thus requires an engagement with the concrete phenomena that the poet or the rhythmanalyst, or the poet as rhythmanalyst, encounters. MacNeice's stated refusal to "abstract [his beliefs] from their context" (prefatory note), in the poem which is "about nearly everything which from first-hand experience I consider significant" underlines the way in which the poetic journal is embedded in its social, historical and material contexts, and lies at the intersection of the lived and the aesthetic.

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