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DEREK MAHON'S AFFILIATIONS WITH ALBERT CAMUS

Mahon is a world-conscious poet from a generation of poets distrustful of stereotypes. His negative attitude towards nationalism and his postulates of humanism as an essential value in the creative processes at both the individual and the social levels, inevitably lead his writing to the questions of man's existential condition. The poet's personality and his political views place him in proximity to the twentieth century existential writers who advanced, if not actually exhausted, the possible interpretations of human life. One of them is unquestionably Albert Camus. Resisting the label of a classical existentialist, he formulated a vision of life's immanent uncertainty in the face of the inevitability of death, thus cultivating the existential philosophy of moral crisis. Mahon's poetry is considerably indebted to Camus's output and may be compared and related to it, since the poet's literary individuality developed in the shadow of his great predecessor. Their uncompromising declarations and disturbingly profound observations on human nature and the place of the human will in the weird proceedings of life are relevant to the personal experiences of the poet. Nevertheless, Mahon approaches these with the criticism of a representative of a different generation, and of another psychological disposition. Camus may be considered as a vital source of concepts, yet the poet entering the discourse contributes to it by presenting his own counterpoints, structuring a whole system of images and techniques to enhance and alter the vision into an original creation. Although his work does not involve a pioneering inquiry into existential topics, it forms a masterly netting of various, often seemingly contradictory elements, assembled into a picture of definite integrity.

Derek Mahon explicitly invokes the name of Albert Camus only in one of his poems. However, Camus's philosophy of humanist existentialism recurs in his work. Mahon does not accept the entirety of the complex system proposed by the French writer, choosing merely the aspects of

immediate application to his largely hopeless and saddened view of the world. In spite of Mahon's preference for a fellow Irish émigré, Samuel Beckett, with whom he shares the avoidance of verbosity and an ironically terminal vision, he seems to be also indebted to Camus in his most serious poems dealing with life's inherent absurdity. The distance between the philosopher and the poet, created both by the generation gap and different experience, seems to diminish when one considers the fundamental moral values manifested in their respective works. Their involvement in existential issues and the logical consequences of their repudiation of religion differ as much as the two men, but remain vivid. The humble background of the Algerian working-class descendant, insistent on his right to intellectual dissent from the anti-humanist trends of the time[1] and an active resistance to the inhumane conditions of the war explain the impossibility of total convergence with Mahon's views. The former faced ideological and political choices and was urged to judge the revolutionary tendencies in Europe, whereas the poet knew them only from second-hand reports. Therefore, the passion of the innovative atheist ideology mutates in the poems discussed here into a selectively adapted form. The similarities and disparities that arise from Mahon's readings of Camus define the poet and his "make-believe existentialism"[2] in reference to his grand predecessor as a true disciple of the non-religious ethics.

In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" Albert Camus conceptualises his perception of absurdity, which accords with Mahon's own understanding of accessible reality. In the world devoid of all delusions, he explains, humans see themselves as strangers and their exile becomes interminable in the absence of sentimental recollections or attractive prospects. What he calls *absurd* is the discord between humans and their lives, or as he speaks metaphorically, between the actor and the decorations.[3] The decorations are doubtless the concepts that distract human attention from an awareness of the pointlessness of all efforts and offer hope in spite of all facts that clearly negate the existence of any externally induced order. In other words, Camus presents a world without an omnipresent patron, but possessed by an omnipresent chaos, where a human being emerges as a fragile alien. In consequence, the philosopher proposes the only logically viable alternative, namely either suicide, a passage from suffering to non-existence, or, as Thomas Merton observes in his study of *La Peste*, hard work leading to

[1] Thomas Merton, *Siedem esejów o Albercie Camus*, przeł. Renata Krempl (Bydgoszcz: 1996), p. 16.

[2] Derek Mahon, "Dawn at St Patrick," *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin 1992), p. 105.

[3] Albert Camus, "Mit Syzyfa," in: *Eseje*, przeł. J. Guze (Warszawa: PIW), p. 100.

solidarity with others.[4] In Camus's reasoning, the latter is accepted as a possibility that dignifies humans, even if differently from the classical understanding of religious dimensions. This idea is best expressed in the quotation from the novel, where the narrator, Bernard Rieux, concludes his fight against the plague: "Pour devenir un saint, il faut vivre."[5] This belief in a glorifying struggle places the name of Sisyphus in one of the most famous essays ever written by Camus. Merton points to the convergence between this infamous "anti-hero", sentenced to the never-ending toil of rolling his stone up the hill, and Camus's heroes who refuse to surrender till the end.[6]

One of Derek Mahon's poems, apparently inspired by the modern reading of the myth, also pertains to Sisyphus and makes him its title hero. The poem begins with a bitter confession of the eternal prisoner who seems to be a victim rather than offender. Although this founder of Corinth was originally presented as a lover of gossip, severely punished by the gods of Olympus for revealing their secrets to humans, here his acts of indiscretion are referred to as "sad truths" he told "to men". Whereas Merton opposes any resemblance between Sisyphus and Prometheus[7] in his study of Camus, Derek Mahon endows the mythic character with the qualities of a saviour whose suffering originates in the attempt to disseminate knowledge among men. Like Prometheus, he experiences perpetual mental agony and physical pain anew for the sake of humanity. Sisyphus inhabits the dark realm of Hades devoid of hope. His despair is attributed to the awareness of his sacrifice's futility. The loftiness of purpose and the inherent impossibility of positive achievement render Sisyphus an absurd saint, despised, not worshipped, for his revolt against the divine injustice. His "sad truths" were to deprive divinity of its hypocritical aura of superiority, reducing it to the ordinary. Sisyphus transpires to be the incarnation of the poet himself and supposedly all others who dared face the mutable world by resisting the desire to fill it with illusions of stability. The direct addressee of Mahon's poems of scant hope and atheist sadness is then partly himself. If the reader dismisses them as non-Christian and feels offended by their boldness of thought, just as Sisyphus' contemporaries were reluctant to accept his arguments, consequently the ideas expressed in the poems turn against the author. He becomes absurd himself if his artistic output is meant as a rebellion against the accepted order which the public would

[4] Thomas Merton, "*Dżuma* Alberta Camusa: Komentarz i wprowadzenie" in: *Siedem esejów o Albercie Camus*, p. 29; "Terror i absurd: przemoc i wyrzeczenie się przemocy (*nonviolence*) u Alberta Camusa," *ibid.*, p. 109.

[5] Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 305.

[6] Th. Merton, "*Dżuma* Alberta Camusa...", p. 33.

[7] *Ibid.*

not exchange for the perspective of a metaphysically meaningless existence. Thus as an artist, the announcer of truth, he is both divine, central to all spiritual experience, and heretical, opposing the established forms. With his power to punish verbally, most efficiently he punishes himself. The pain of such ego-centred existence is revealed in the phrase: "my stone and I." The stone is an opponent, and yet the closest object, difficult to handle like the artistic profession and the creative cycle, the sources of ceaseless and unrewarded suffering:

> The climb, the crest and the collapse –
> And [I] watch with rising, falling hopes
> The tired earth and the empty sky.

If the poetic activity – the equivalent of Sisyphus' endless movement uphill – fails to convey any ultimate truth, then the sublime becomes redundant and turns into the meaningless. What remains are the crude rituals that portray life as set in an absolutely chaotic scenario of earth, in the void of a cosmic vastness. However, despite the hopelessness and lack of any metaphysical support, Mahon's Sisyphus persists in his work as any of Camus's positive characters would.

Actually, it seems that the character faces no choice. If suicide is excluded as a praiseworthy existential stance, progress in self-education can be achieved only by adamant continuation. In the same collection where "Sisyphus" can be found, there is a poem taking up the same subject, but reworking it into a wholly contemporary vision, that of the waking London of working people. "Winter Mornings" presents the pessimistic view of life as a stretch of tedious routine squeezed between the dark moments of birth and death, respectively removing people from and restoring them to nothingness. Survival appears to be the question of attuning to the requirements of society by demonstrating almost mechanical industriousness, which is also to muffle the sense of vacuity. This vision overlaps with Camus's concept of survival. The plague is symbolic of all forms of evil[8], among which death occupies a prominent place, being the inevitable but loathed necessity the heroes attempt to combat, opposing its design to annihilate the city. Mahon recognises the plague in the destiny of "uncomplaining men and women" who are presented as "rising once more to the occasion" in the small hours of sunless November mornings and face the hopelessness anew. The stance of mute acceptance is maintained for, as the poet rhetorically asks, "will this not remain / The only way to stay alive?" Therefore, in accord with Camus's prescription, the anonymous remain

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

active, humbly observing the laws of the hostile world. Unlike Camus however, Mahon does not perceive surrender to the external gloom, which spreads onto human minds, as spiritually liberating. The ideal of fraternity and mutual understanding, advocated by Camus, is also absent from the poem which, instead, paradoxically declares insurmountable isolation as the only real association between people:

> Maker and fitter, warehouseman and clerk,
> Possessed by the unbeatable abstractions,
> Lie down in darkness, rise up in the dark.

Equality appearing in the enumeration of professions turns out to be deceptive, as it soon unravels the negative nature of this link. The men share the type of life where delusions distance them from each other, each separated in the world of their "tombed visions."[9] The monotony of their lives becomes dramatic when the naivety, the foundation of their fallacious beliefs, appears to condemn them to perpetual darkness, representative of ignorance and spiritual death in Mahon's writing. Days and nights are indistinguishable, possessed by shadows, into which the nameless protagonists of the poem finally turn into the terminal vision of the last two lines, when they "clock out/ For ever, and never rise again." Similarly to Camus, Mahon negates the possibility of resurrection and the bliss of the afterlife offered by Christianity. Yet, the people living in darkness are preoccupied with attempts to turn futile and unresponsive phenomena into the sublime, thus betraying their intellect and succumbing to the abstract. Just as Sisyphus rolling his stone uphill, here "The early ones / Are there already, turning hands to work / Monotonous miracles – blood from stones." Like himself, the people face cruel monotony. The irony of their lives, though, dwells in their longing to elevate the meaning of existence and to pass away with the conviction of imminent transference into eternity as a reward for earthly virtue. "It is this gives rise to the God we thank each night," says the speaker, being under no illusions as to the true nature of religion. God serves as an 'emergency exit' for those who refuse to admit that life has no divine dimension, and do not see that all those living before him were also potential victims of the plague, "Tire de cette longue conversation interieure qu'il soutenait avec une ombre, il etait alors jete sans transition au plus epais silence de la terre. Il n'avait eu le temps de rien."[10] God is remembered when he grants rest or comfort, but in daylight the horrors of existential fear diminish. Then humans confronted with the hardships of life, with its temptations and doubts, and with the incurable melancholy

[9] Ted Hughes, *Two Legends I. Crow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 13.
[10] Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 91.

"on winter mornings in the deliberate rain," "curse" this insubstantial, impotent deity, thus perpetuating the ignominy of total existential inconsistency.

Mahon regularly refers to the death or reduction of deity in his poetry. Nietzsche's concept of an empty and hostile heaven runs through the poems concerned with the human search for identity. These philosophical origins of Mahon's pessimism do not trammel his whole output, not even when one considers the poet's religious stance. In the 1972 collection, *Lives*, there appears a poem which carries metaphysical discourse beyond Camus's nonacceptance of the idea of a benign God in a decayed world. Nor is there any mention of human compliance with the death of God, whose commandments are apparently disregarded in the twentieth century history and revolution, which Camus calls terror.[11] In his poem "Job's Comforter" Mahon makes an innovating step, showing the actual reversal of God's and man's respective roles. Whereas in Camus's writing God is either absent (*L'Etranger*) or remorseless and bloodthirsty in the manner of The Old Testament Jehovah (*La Peste*), this particular poem features a despairing God, shrunken in the presence of His former servile dependant. There seems to be a curious case for the revival of God, who now himself needs to be saved and comforted. His cold detachment gone, he can no longer impress or subjugate people. Job found comfort in the earthly warmth of his kitchen, where he "snores / content and ignorant" of all the magnitude of the universe. The previously powerful God finds himself useless and humiliated. He has now "cried disconsolately / to the dumb mountain so the ravens flew," although – the author highlights it initially in the poem – he was so "cold once." The speaker does not suppress the temptation of the revengeful irony of the one who has known hopelessness and futility of appealing to the celestial powers. The rhetorical questions that follow deepen the mood of mute satisfaction:

> Job's saviour, who can save you with his pity?
> Job's comforter, who is to comfort you?
> *Insomniac* in the kitchen . . .
>
> do you sometimes hear,
> *conch-like*, a groan of water on the shores
> of lives unlived or lived beyond all fear? (my italics)

The word "saviour" sounds ludicrous when juxtaposed with the image of a neurotic, sleepless creature compared to a primitive organism in its impotence and inferiority. Human condition used to be defined by his will in the matters of utmost importance, but now it is he who depends on humans to restore him to his former position, facing inattention similar to

[11] Thomas Merton, "Terror i absurd: Przemoc i wyrzeczenie się przemocy...", in: *Siedem esejów...*, p. 101.

his own when he was still in power. Humility, which is considered by Merton the key idea of *La Peste*[12], is absent from the world of men, and the hitherto almighty is ignored. Only the powerful element, the sea, Mahon's symbol of force, mutability and purification, pities the dehumanised lives whose speed allows no metaphysical reflection, and which are devoid of hope for metaphysical support to the extent that the fear of punishment has no access to them. Yet, the vacuity of these lives has been induced by God himself. It is his own vanity, egotism and unsympathetic strictness He now repents, suffering purgatorial torments of conscience, woken for the first time ever. To all the questions posed by the speaker, response is as follows: "Yes, and there *love* makes its interstices" (my italics), at the shores of the miserable lives. This is an almost Camus-like reaction, but not precisely. Mahon, who rejects communal solidarity as a method of resistance against the absurdity of existence, thinks of another solution: individual affection for another human being.

In the poem "A Tolerable Wisdom" the poet encapsulates the importance of intimate interpersonal bonds for clinging onto a hopeless existence. This piece, which may be called a love poem, commences with "you" in block letters. The pronoun announces the invaluable role of a partner in providing spiritual sustenance and motivating survival. The person acts as a metaphorical barrier, a protector from the ravages of the external world and the catalyst of the poet's own internal conflicts. But for that intervention he would consider himself lost, succumbing to destructive moods.

> YOU keep the cold from the body, the cold from the mind –
> heartscloth, soulswool, without you there would be
> short shrift for the pale beast in a winter's wind,
> too swift exposure by too brute a sea.

Derek Mahon's affiliations with Albert Camus seem to be best concluded in the 1985 *Antarctica* poem entitled "Death and the Sun." The title, the dedication to his grand predecessor, heralds the continuation of the existential motif. The word 'death' in the title alludes both to the theoretical speculations and the actual tragic death of the French writer. The sun in turn evokes Plato's ancient theory of a cave man fearing the full glare of light, symbolising the existential truth. These two concepts form the skeleton of the poem. Its last stanza sums up the whole and reveals the similarities between the visions of the northern European and the colonial émigré:

> One cannot look for long at death or the sun.
> Imagine Plato's neolithic troglodyte
> Released from his dark cinema, released even
> From the fire proper, so that he stands at last,

[12] Thomas Merton, "*Dżuma* Alberta Camusa..., p. 28.

Absurd and anxious, out in the open air
And gazes, shading his eyes, at the world there –
Tangible fact ablaze in a clear light
That casts no shadow, where the vast
Sun gongs its lenity from a brazen heaven
Listening in silence to his rich despair.

Reviving the spirit of the renowned philosopher and presenting his ideas in contemporary terms of easily accessible thoughtless gratification, Mahon joins the circle of existential writers. Solitude is man's condition, which one cannot face without a profound sense of loss. Therefore, Mahon seems to address Camus in a slightly reproachful tone as the advocate of that full awareness and unmitigated conviction of being "a handful of dust."[13] The poet radically opposes this severe postulate, claiming that the knowledge that comes with experience cannot be avoided and does not benefit those who possess it. The reader is reminded by Mahon that even Camus could not act in accord with his ideals. The tone of disenchantment leads the reader to the final conclusion. It must be admitted, if one is to follow Mahon's argument, that humans are "wee shadows" and 'Sisyphus' descendants, briefly content", imagining life as more generous than it has the capacity to be. However, Mahon also remarks that "each ghost / Steams on the shore as if awaiting rescue" – waiting impatiently to get their share of the impossible. This is in human nature to await miracles, even if they never happen, and to expect revelations in the world where there is apparently no place for them.

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[13] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* in: *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. II, p. 21–23, line 30.