

Derek Mahon

**THE  
POEMS**

(1961-2020)

*Edited by Peter Fallon*



Gallery Books

*The Poems (1961-2020)*  
is first published  
simultaneously in paperback  
and in a clothbound edition  
on 23 September 2021.

The Gallery Press  
Loughcrew  
Oldcastle  
County Meath  
Ireland

[www.gallerypress.com](http://www.gallerypress.com)

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[books@gallerypress.com](mailto:books@gallerypress.com)*

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ISBN 978 1 85235 512 8 *paperback*  
978 1 85235 513 5 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

*The Poems (1961-2020)* receives financial assistance  
from the Arts Councils of Ireland.



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## *Penshurst Place*

The bright drop quivering on a thorn  
in the rich silence after rain,  
lute music in the orchard aisles,  
the paths ablaze with daffodils,  
intrigue and venerary in the air  
*à l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*,  
the iron hand and the velvet glove —  
come live with me and be my love.

A pearl face numinously bright  
shining in silence of the night,  
a muffled crash of smouldering logs,  
bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs,  
the Spanish ships around Kinsale,  
the screech owl and the nightingale,  
the falcon and the turtle dove —  
come live with me and be my love.

## *The Mute Phenomena*

*after Nerval*

Your great mistake is to disregard the satire  
bandied among the mute phenomena.  
Be strong if you must, your brisk hegemony  
means fuck-all to the somnolent sunflower  
or the extinct volcano. What do you know  
of the revolutionary theories advanced  
by turnips, or the sex life of cutlery?  
Everything is susceptible, Pythagoras said so.

An ordinary common-or-garden brick wall, the kind  
for talking to or banging your head on,  
resents your politics and bad draughtsmanship.  
God is alive and lives under a stone;  
already in a lost hubcap is conceived  
the ideal society which will replace our own.



## Brian Moore's Belfast

for Gerald Dawe

The last trams were still running in those days.  
Women wore hats and gloves, nylons, fox fur;  
raw fissures lingered where incendiaries  
demolished half of Clifton St. in April of '41:  
the big band era, dances and commotion,  
but the war ended and rain swept once more  
parks and playgrounds, chapel and horse trough  
'to die in the faraway mists over Belfast Lough'.

Do this, do that, road closed, no entry, stop! —  
a world of signs and yet the real thing too:  
even now I catch a whiff of brack and bap,  
the soap and ciggies of the *disparus*.  
Buns from Stewart's, gobstoppers from Graham's,  
our crowd intent on our traditional games,  
sectarian puzzlement, a swinging rope,  
freezing winters, pristine bicycle frames;

school windows under the Cave Hill, childish faces,  
uncles and aunties, pipes and lipstick traces,  
epiphanies in sheds and woody places:  
how can we not love the first life we knew?  
'We can dream only what we know,' he said.  
I know the whole length of the Antrim Road  
and often dream of Salisbury Avenue;  
mysterious Hazelwood, I still think of you.

On Riverside Drive and a California beach  
such things revisited him, just out of reach,  
just as he left them after Naples, Warsaw,  
frozen for ever in the austere post-war  
where frequent silence keeps its own integrity  
and smoky ghosts of the exhausted city  
rustle with phantom life whose time is up.  
They queue in Campbell's crowded coffee shop

or wait for a bus at Robb's. I can make out  
a clutch of gantries, a white sepulchre  
grimly vigilant on its tiny acre,  
skirts and shirts mid-20th-century style  
in dimly lit arcades, carpets of wet  
grain at the quayside where a night boat  
churns up the dark and a rapturous old girl  
sings 'Now Is the Hour' with her eternal smile.

## *Radiance*

Gym-fit to work but dream-deprived,  
the early chronotypes are on the road  
at furious daybreak while the longer-lived  
late risers, slothful, doubtful, lie abed  
until the town is freshly aired.

Touching the void — oh, years ago —  
the sun burst into flames ‘and there was light’  
wherever it sent out its productive glow;  
but surely we don’t mean to abolish night  
with blue-rich radiance shining bright

on field and stream without relief,  
airports and sports facilities, high-tech premises,  
white wastes of the contemporary life.  
Where now is the shadowy anamnesis  
with its mysterious promises?

Darken our blinding light a bit  
and turn the volume down so we can hear  
ourselves thinking, if we’ve a taste for thought;  
even now the obscure silences might survive  
where an original thought can thrive.

## *St Cecilia’s Day*

*for Paul Simon*

Cecilia, you can break the heart  
and shake the confidence daily. On my knees  
inside your elegant church in bright Trastevere,  
I listened to the organ, charmed by every  
chord and grace note, each archaic wheeze  
of pipe and keyboard. Your high art,

composed of air and rapture, cries  
to heaven for intervention with a tremor  
caught from the heavens; as in the Madeleine once  
hearing the organ music of Saint-Saëns,  
the great third symphony in C minor,  
I felt transported to the skies.

A child of solitude, and in serious  
recognition of your consoling sound,  
please may I dedicate this one to you, Paul,  
voice of an age, and that inspiring girl  
Cecilia patron of music, organist, blind  
interpreter of the turning spheres.