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Derek Mahon's Seascapes Mediated through Greece:

Antiquity in Modernity, Nature in Abstraction

Focusing on Derek Mahon's three seascape poems, which are either related directly and indirectly to modern Greece and its ancient history, or inviting comparison with Modern Greek poetry, this chapter inquires into Mahon's poetic reflection on the relationship between seascape and myth from antiquity into the present, to end up with the poetic distillation of the nature myth into the sphere of the abstract and the universal. The poet's practice is set against the concise background of the Irish-Greek modern inspirations, a domain scarcely explored in comparison to the ancient frame of reference.

While Greek antiquity has famously provided Irish poets with a paradigm to confront modernity and its problematic history (Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Michael Longley, Eavan Boland and others), their connection with the Modern Greek element has been less evident. We can trace references as well as translations or adaptations from Cavafy and George Seferis in the work of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney. Obviously, contemporary Greek poetry may act as a filter to access antiquity; at the first glance, this seems to be the case, for instance, of Heaney's poem 'To George Seferis in the Underworld' where he quotes Seferis quoting Plato, or of his adaptation of Cavafy's untitled poem where he quotes Cavafy quoting Sophocles (2006, pp. 20-21, 73). Yet in both poems Heaney focuses on the contemporaneity of the two countries (Ireland and Greece), for which the writings of classical philosophers and playwrights, together with the mythology they

probe, function as a background.1

Apart from this channel, ancient and modern Greece and Ireland communicate just as fundamentally through the means of landscape. Greece defines itself as a sea country even more than Ireland; some Modern Greek poets devoted the most substantial part of their oeuvre to [p. 70] the ever-fertile theme of the sea (Nikos Kavadias or D. I. Antoniou). Yet the unsurpassed master of the seascape was Odysseas Elytis, worshipper of the sun and a philosopher of Greek nature (the term he favoured over 'landscape') for which, to be able to formulate his meditations, he invented an idiosyncratic idiom. Contrary to the other Greek Nobelist, George Seferis, who would use the framework of ancient history or myth such as the *Odyssey*, Elytis – besides antiquity – came up with his own myth, a modern one, if we take into account the years of its creation, but timeless in its meaning.

If we now consider modern Irish verse, it is Michael Longley who has long been defined as the poet of nature, and simultaneously as the one quite substantially relying on the Greek material. This singular interest pivots around ancient mythology, yet among the cardinal stimuli behind his practice in this respect one should mention, just as in Mahon's case, an inclination to explore Greek landscape. The point of departure for both poets converges despite contextual differences: their vantage point being the Irish landscape, they both contemplate its Greek – ancient and modern – aspects. Longley is concerned with myth that brings these landscapes into interaction; he associates them with the feelings of familiarity and safety ensuing from the notion of home, but at the same time with their exact opposite: horrors and extremities of wars and conflicts from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to contemporary Northern Ireland (Longley, 1998, pp. 18-20). In the course of Longley's career this dichotomy finally materializes itself in a cycle of poems based on Homer, including the slaughter Odysseus performs in his own house, rendered by the Irish poet in 'Butchers' (Longley, 1991, p. 51).

One remark seems worthwhile on this occasion: it is fascinating to observe how, in combination with the Underworld, nature has become the focus of Greek references for the three Irish poets

under discussion, that is, Longley, Heaney and Mahon. The key to this combination, one that could truly serve as an alternative theme of this chapter, is a tiny flower: asphodel. The topos of the asphodel meadows of Hades has been running in Greek literature ever since Homer. In 'Butchers' Longley quotes it in a 'hibernicized', as he puts it, form of a 'bog-asphodel' in a 'bog-meadow' (Longley, 1998, p. 19). These word mutations not only shift the scenery to Ireland (the poem alludes to the story of Shankill Butchers), but intrinsically release the ghosts of the victims of the slaughter together with the poet's internal tension. Seamus Heaney, famously digging in the past and making frequent trips to the Underground, chooses asphodel as one of the leading motifs of his poetic letter to George Seferis. Mahon opens his best-known poem, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', with a [p. 71] quote from Seferis's *Mythistorema*: 'Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels.' The whole poem is a sadly ironic dialogue with both the *Odyssey* and with Seferis.² Later on, Mahon finds himself 'among spaceship vertebrae and white asphodels' in today's Cyclades ('Aphrodite's Pool', discussed below). All three poets bestow on this inconspicuous symbol of the past, and the afterlife, the honour and the burden of negotiating with Greek and Irish modernity.

While Longley has occupied a dominant position as the poet of nature, it is in Mahon's work that seascape seems most prominent. The way he investigates its contemporary destruction has no parallel in the work of the mentioned Modern Greek poets, though he seems to come close to Seferis in his archeology. We will focus on three poems by Derek Mahon: two outings to the Greek territory, one factual and one virtual, and on a description of the Irish landscape that invites comparison with Elytis.

A closer look at Mahon's example from the aforementioned list of 'asphodel inspirations', that is his 'Aphrodite's Pool' (Mahon, 1997, p. 37-38), reveals paradoxically that instead of the Underworld, it transports the readers to paradise islands. One can try to link this fact to an observation provided by the Unesco website devoted to environmental issues of small islands: that once, in ancient Greece, there existed the connection between the land of the dead and the Isles of

the Blest, and that centuries later the Irish monk Saint Brendan set on a successful guest for a paradise island. (Unesco, 2010) The spirit and perception of Mahon's poem seem to correspond more to the website's concerns for the endangered world invaded by technology than to the narratives of Thomas More, Francis Bacon and other explorers of paradise islands. 'Aphrodite's Pool' affords a gaze into man-made Greek seaside landscapes. As we know, Mahon is a specialist in the description of man-transformed coastline: his writings scrutinize polluted, industrial areas of harbours and docks ('April on Toronto Island', 'On the Beach', 'Afterlives', to name just a few) or the depressing atmosphere of Northern Irish sea resorts ('North Wind: Portrush', 'The Sea in Winter', 'Un Beau Pays Mal Habité' and others). The scene presented in 'Aphrodite's Pool' apparently escapes the issue of pollution and the pessimistic tone. I have called it 'seaside landscape' for it cannot be even called a 'seascape', its emphasis being not the sea but a swimming pool by the sea. The speaker of the poem may be thus enjoying facilities of one of Greek luxury hotels in the Cyclades (on Santorini, or perhaps on Mykonos, the 'capital' island of the archipelago, if we follow the proper name of its Aphrodite Beach Hotel equipped with a swimming pool with sea water), or simply a rich friend's hospitality. [p. 72] The tone of the whole poem sounds far from fatalistic. With humour and ostensible hedonism, the author engages in a hip-holiday juggle of words, ideas, conventions and traditions.

Yet the fact that Mahon at the seaside chooses to write about a swimming pool and not the sea, that Aphrodite does not emerge from the sea waves but appears in the name of the pool as a tourist attraction and that the poem brims with references to mythology in a pop consumerist setting – all suggest that the tourist version of the Greek seascape, despite the poem's light tone, can be matched with the industrial versions of the Irish seascape Mahon so often writes about. Both seem to be corrupted by civilization. Greece is basically not an industrial country; one of its sources of income is tourism or what is actually called tourist industry – and that is exactly the approach to places such as Mykonos or Santorini, famous for kitsch ready-made tourism, be it luxurious or not. On some of the Greek islands, infrastructures that often does not respect natural environment, hotel offers based

on all-inclusive package tours where visitors do not really *visit* the country but simply stay detained (on their own will) in the hotel premises and bathe in swimming pools instead of the sea, and, last but not least, the abuse of ancient Greek culture that guarantees best advertising – all this makes the natural landscape disappear out of sight, just like the Irish seaside disappears behind cranes, trawlers and oil in some of Mahon's poems.

'Nymphs have been there', the sybarite speaker of 'Aphrodite's Pool' wisecracks, watching some girl's belongings in that temple of the senses. This particular line resonates with T. S. Eliot's 'The nymphs are departed' from 'The Waste Land'. In Eliot's poem the phrase is embedded in the description of the polluted Thames where the author reverses the pastoral convention: instead of the idyllic rural scene readers are confronted with urban rubbish. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the departed nymphs with gilded youth, handkerchiefs, boxes and 'other testimony of summer nights', Eliot undermines the love motif connected with Elizabeth and Leicester, whose feelings become debased with the implication of the nymphs' occupation, which is prostitution. Of course, Aphrodite was also the goddess of sexuality and patron to the world's oldest profession. If we think of Santorini again, it gained fame as the isle of lovers, while Mykonos is one of Greek destinations for sex tourists... There is nothing pastoral about hotel resorts, which in Greece are often situated in special tourist towns or areas that become ghost towns in low season. While this is not manifest, if at all signalled, in Mahon's poem, anyone familiar with both genuine Greek seascape and the wealth of its ancient tradition cannot escape such reflections when reading it. Enough to mention that [p. 73] the Cyclades first and foremost epitomize Greek seascape in one of its purest forms, both in terms of nature operating basically between light and darkness within quite a limited scope of shapes, and in terms of traditional architecture unparalleled in its refined geometrical simplicity, as if descending from the ancient Cycladic art. Odysseas Elytis was one of those who sensed the connection between ancient and folk Cycladic art and between the seascape and its human and transcendent element.

In 'Aphrodite's Pool', Mahon, just as Eliot, obviously plays with the pastoral convention. The

backdrop for the nymphs is provided by cicadas and mosquitoes, the sky advertises the sunset alongside astronomy, while 'goats / and donkeys nod in the god-familiar hills' on the border of two worlds: a mock supernatural futuristic one ('spaceship vertebrae') and a quasi-mythical past future ('white asphodels' suggesting afterlife). In the midst of this chaos, the speaker poses as a satyr; 'poses' since he evidently distances himself from that pose by employing an ironic externalized perspective: 'The prone body is mine, that of a satyr, / a fat, unbronzed, incongruous visitor.' Readers finally lose their bearings in this modern Arcadia, not knowing whether Mahon is talking about a swimming pool (blue tiles, chlorine, showers and dolphin murals) or about some natural pond that 'ticks faintly among the rocks'. That realm of peace and quiet where

water nymphs have been here printing the blind nap-time silence with supernatural toes and casting magic on the ruffled water (Mahon, 1997, p. 37)

is being constantly invaded by aeroplanes, ships, surf-boards, inflatable rafts, discos and other blessings of tourist civilization.

Undeniably, a broader framework of the convention that Mahon manipulates in this poem is mythology and antiquity. Apart from bucolic references, he casts a sweeping eye over the antiquity kitsch surrounding the swimming pool: dolphin murals and 'the wash-house like a temple to the Muses'. The image of dolphins evokes a chain of associations. Worshipped in ancient Crete, they were often depicted in Minoan art gaining a symbolic dimension. Then they re-emerged in the Cyclades (the Minoan influence in the region being one of the reasons), and in later mythology they were associated with Aphrodite, Apollo or Dionysos. In other words, in Mahon's poem sacred attributes are being literary traded, transformed into empty gadgets, which modern Greece [p. 74] sells to tourists. Tourists in their turn scout for traces of the past in landscape. The fact that the places and place names of ancient worship have not disappeared from the map stimulates their imagination to *interpret* the surroundings in terms of their symbolic past. Yet another sybaritic mask of the speaker is related to pseudo-history ('I flirt like some corrupt, capricious emperor'), while the

whole scenery is disguised as the science-fictional *Metamorphoses*:

for this is the mythic moment of metamorphosis when quantitative becomes qualitative and genes perform their atom-dance of mad mutation... (Mahon, 1997, p. 37-38)

At the end of the poem, among aphrodisiac sea-lanes and stars-of-the-sea (the ciphered trademark of Blue Star Ferries), there hides a tiny word revealing the core of this paradise island vision: Atlantis. It suggests that the location of the poem may indeed be Santorini, ancient Thira, one of the most popular candidates for situating the lost paradise because of the volcano eruption that swept the Minoan civilization from the face of the planet. Having in mind that Atlantis goes missing, just as this tourist paradise is a fake, one might wonder if Mahon does not smuggle in the truth about modern existence, which consists of digestible versions of the past and technological versions of the present and the future, however enjoyable the package may seem to the reader. Towards the end of this chapter we will be able to compare it with a version of paradise islands (in another of Mahon's poems) before their alleged fall: 'alleged', as, fortunately enough, it is enough to get out of the hotel area and still encounter pure Greek seascape.

This is not the only instance where the Cyclades appears in Mahon's poetry. Landscape is represented more archetypically in the description of the sacred isle of Delos, the heart of the Aegean, in Mahon's 'Banished Gods' (Mahon, 1999, p. 85), even though it is inhabited by mocked ancient gods and exists 'in an unbroken dream-time' devoid of 'cars, computers / or chemical skies'. We will focus here on a different representation in one of Mahon's most famous seascape poems, 'Achill' (Mahon, 1991, p. 180), which draws a network of connections between Ireland and the Greek archipelago. Contrary to what one might expect from such a comparative frame, the proper name in the title is not derived from the *Iliad* protagonist, but denotes the Irish island off the west coast [p.75] in Co. Mayo. Its etymology is probably derived from the Gaelic word for 'eagle', and the poem opens with an epigraph from a seventeenth-century Gaelic poet Piaras Feiritéar

(Haughton, 2007, p. 203). The first lines of Mahon's poem ('I lie and imagine a first light gleam...') approach the meaning of the epigraph and introduce the feeling of solitude conveyed by Feiritéar. The speaker in Mahon's poem misses his family who has left for Paros in the Cyclades. The classical Irish seascape, which he is immerged in, with its sudden light, 'the sun through the mist', currachs, turf smoke and recurring rain showers, seems very distant from the Aegean, all the more as the distance is intensified by longing. Yet, at the same time, the speaker probes the horizon for similarities and clutches to the most protruding of its features, Croagh Patrick, that 'towers like Naxos over the water'. Triggering thoughts of his daughter, the view virtually transports him to Paros, the vantage point for observing Naxos towering over the sea. The scene of a shearwater that 'skims the ridge of an incoming wave' spurs his imagination to visualize his son as 'a dolphin in the Aegean'. Wishing that his daughter were with him 'between thrush and plover, / Wild thyme and sea-thrift', he may be aware of the fact that wild thyme is one of the most widespread Greek plants, while all these birds also visit Greek islands, not to mention that 'Thrush' is the title of one of Seferis's best known poem. The poem closes with the vision of Mahon's wife in a scene evocative of Odysseus thinking of his Penelope (Mahon, 1991, p. 180):

And I lie and imagine the lights going on in the harbour Of white-housed Náousa, your clear definition at night, And wish you were here to upstage my disconsolate labour . . .

What ensues from this analysis is that this very Irish poem, referring in its epigraph to Celtic literature and described by the poet as 'an attempt to recreate in English a certain kind of old Irish poetry' (Haughton, 2007, p. 203), stretches out across the continent to immerse in the Greek Big Blue in an attempt to find home. Paradoxically, the speaker feels as if exiled in his native country, in one of the most Irish islands, and, scanning the horizon for Ithaca, moves his heart to Greece. Of course, it may simply be assumed that the poem confronts the reader with the divergent meanings of the term 'home' as 'family' and 'country', but is it not astonishing that Mahon would try to recreate old Irish poetry by relating the Irish seascape to the Greek one, as if he wanted to undermine that

Irishness or gain distance from it like Heaney's inner emigré, or like Joyce's Stephen, concluding 'The shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead' (Mahon, 1995, p. 194). The issue of Mahon's relation to home is enormous⁴. Suffice [p. 76] to say that he has been believed to represent the case of a homeless, or to be the least Irish of contemporary Irish poets. Mahon's Irishness was defended by some critics (Frank Sewell), and poets (Heaney), while other critics regarded it as a drawback (McDonald). Mahon himself once said, 'My soul landscape is Irish and there's no getting away from that' (Mahon, 1985, p. 19). With this phrase borrowed from Beckett, Mahon referred to the influence of the Irish playwright's visual imagination and philosophy on his writings. Bearing this in mind, one can regard the solitude, the light, and the state of estrangement that suffuses 'Achill' as a reflection of Mahon's soul landscape. It does not seem a coincidence that this defamiliarization is triggered by Greek seascape, both in terms of the speaker's teleportation and the hellenization of the Irish element. The reasons lie not only in the actual circumstances, physical conditions or the myth of the *Odyssey*, but also in a similarity between the mentalities of both nations. The Greek mind has been mostly shaped by the sea (to much greater extent than by the mountains constituting eighty percent of the country's territory). Determined by the sea, Greek life and its choices revolving for ages around voyage and emigration, are also characteristic for Irish history, rendered by Mahon in 'Canadian Pacific' (Mahon, 1999, p. 24), for instance. It comes as no surprise then that the mediation of Greek seascape should allow Irish poets to consider their ambivalent relation with home.

Some Irish islands appear in Mahon's poetry as dreamlike entities beyond time, as metaphysical sanctuaries of virgin nature, far from his native Northern Irish conflict. Even this illusion, however, is shattered by history (Mahon, 1991, 'Rathlin', p. 122). Paradise islands become an unreachable dream for people trapped in the civilization pattern of city life and technological surroundings, just as in 'April on Toronto Island' (Mahon, 1968, p. 30):

Their faces dream of other islands, Clear cliffs and salt water, Fields brighter that paradise in the first week of creation – Grace caught in a wind or a tide, our Lives in infinite preparation.

This dream, however, is available: not only is it reminiscent of the Irish coastline but also accessible via human faculties, as transpires just two pages before in the same volume in one of his most famous meditations on the Irish seascape: 'Recalling Aran' (Mahon, 1968, p. 28), also known [p. 77] as 'Thinking of Inis Oirr in Cambridge, Mass.' (Mahon, 1999, p. 25). Comparing this poem with the quoted excerpt from 'April on Toronto Island' (or, for that matter, with a later poem 'Shorelines' (Mahon, 2005, p. 48-50) for instance), we notice that they share the same purity, clarity and innocence, which makes us realize that Mahon treats Irish seascape, and more specifically, the Irish island, in terms of an archetype. On top of that, this exact poem ('Recalling Aran') seems closest to the spirit of Greek landscape in Mahon's output. The word 'spirit' here does not refer to the familiar tendency to personify landscape or conceive landscape in terms of the human, mainly female, body. For many Greek writers, nature has a spiritual value. For Elytis, who developed the most intricate relationship with it, spirit combines with the senses – and so it does in Mahon's poem. 'Recalling Aran' reads as a pronouncedly Irish poem, not only because of its subject, but also of the convention it employs: that of a dream-vision poem, though not an aisling. Mahon hesitates between various terms to designate this mental image – from a 'dream', through 'reflection', 'vision', 'sight', to 'memory' – as if he wanted to define what is indefinable, to pinpoint the fugitive, and eventually, to materialize the abstract. In this last attempt there lies the gist of the poem. In fact, the first two lines constitute the description of landscape:

A dream of limestone in sea-light Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.

This could be a Greek poem. Not only because it describes the essence of the purest Greek landscape: the juxtaposition of limestone, sea and light, with the occasional presence of seagulls.

The correspondence between Inisheer and Greek seascape stretches beyond the similarity of natural resources. It combines a pure spiritual perception, or should we say, enlightenment (which implies rather a passive than an active process) with the profoundest sensual response, neither feeling nor concept, something between sensation and thought. Mahon calls that 'pure sense' and 'experience', but let us call it: experience of a mental image. Together with its ending, set in a sort of ethical framework, where that pure sense provides the speaker with the measure of all things, the poem brings us close to the entire process of Wordsworth's 'emotions recollected in tranquillity' (Wordsworth, 1986, p. 168), with the vital difference that Wordsworth conceived it exactly as a process, or a sequence of separate stages (body, heart, purer mind, morality), while in Mahon's poem the image becomes gradually more distant (from the direct description, through the reflection [p. 78] in the sky, to the memory experienced four thousand miles away), but at the same time more real and material (the sky is final, the vision turns into simple sight, and the memory is not simply recalled but clutched), the two processes – of abstraction (in the sense of 'making abstract') and materialization - occurring simultaneously. The mysterious phrase 'conceived beyond such innocence' may refer both to the speaker and to the memory. Irrespective, it brings in the word 'innocence' which further reinforces the ethical dimension of that absolutely chaste seascape. Mahon seems close to 'beauty's direct communication with the ethical world' advanced by Elytis (Elytis, 1995, p. 97).

We can find all the elements discussed above in the Greek poet's writings: landscape, and specifically the sea, as a nourishment for the senses and as the 'confrontation with the infinite', to quote Mahon's 'New Wave' (Mahon, 2005, p. 52); and landscape is both an influence on and a projection of the poet's state of mind:

For the poet . . . the only common language that he feels remaining to him is the senses. . . I do not mean their first or second accessible level. I mean the very farthest. I mean the 'analogies of the senses' in the spirit. All the arts speak in analogues. . . Often with just a slight twist, natural light turns supernatural and vice versa. . . Could the senses reach purity through their incessant cleansing? Then their analogy will return to the material world and will influence it. (Elytis, 'Nobel Address', 2004, p. 697)

Having discovered the Greek seascape, its secret message, 'equality of ethical and physical values' (Elytis, *Open Papers*, 2004, p. 676) and having understood the mission of the poet to render it in the metaphysics and the ethic of language, Elytis found a poetic method that embodied the corresponding sensations and enchanted him.

If we look at Elytis' early poems such as 'Of the Aegean' (Elytis, 2004, pp. 5-6), the seascape of the beginning communicates with Mahon's – the sea, gulls, dream, islands, rock, horizon, echo – and a human figure that embodies nostalgia, which is also part of Mahon's speaker, for different reasons, but with similar aspects to it: voyage, hope, and vision. Characteristically for Elytis, in the poem we also notice Eros, embodiment of pure life force. It opens each stanza which later develops into a sketch of the physical environment and then goes back to life force embodied in a symbol or a myth, fluctuating, like Mahon's poem years later, between the concrete and the idea, which are one and the same thing.

[p. 79]

I
Eros
The archipelago
And the prow of its foams
And the gulls of its dreams
On its highest mast the sailor waves
A song

Eros
Its song
And the horizons of its voyage
And the echo of its nostalgia
On her wettest rock the betrothed awaits
A ship

Eros Its ship And the nonchalance of its summer winds and the jib of its hope On its lightest undulation an island cradles The coming. . . (Elytis, 2004, p. 5) The sea's erotic power connecting the mind and the body also appeared in one of Mahon's early poems, 'Straight Lines Becoming Circles' (Mahon, 1970, pp. 20-21), written in the manner of Dylan Thomas. Finally, the image of the sea incarnating global life force in its sexual and eternal dimensions crowns his late maritime poem 'Harbour Lights', which opens with a quote from Rachel Carson, one of the first marine ecologists, expressing that feeling of wonder of a newcomer to paradise: Mahon concludes 'For everything is water, the world a wave' (Mahon 2005, pp. 66-67).

Sea as death, as myth, the unknown, history, idyll, chaos, mother or fate – Mahon embraces all these perspectives and so had Elytis before him. This does not only prove that the two nations, different as they are, share a similar sea-related $voo\tau\rho\sigma\pi i\alpha$ – I am using a Greek word for 'mentality', since its etymology, related to $vov\varsigma$, combines the mind and the spirit. Essentially, it proves that seascape provides human beings with a blueprint, which is one of the most compelling stimuli for all their faculties. Responding to it, poets of maritime countries bring it into the scope of their own private mythologies, [p. 80] which simultaneously turn out to archetypically transgress national and natural borders.

- I have devoted a separate article to the first of those poems; apart from nature, it enquires into political and linguistic issues that stem out of the juxtaposition of Seferis's poem with Heaney's. ('Openness and Light in the Dialogue Between the North and the South' Selected Poems by Contemporary Irish and Greek Poets' 2009, Conference 'Playfullness, Light(ness) and Air in Irish Literature and Culture' University of Lodz, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing) to be shortly published.
- Again I discuss these aspects of Mahon's and Heaney's poems in the article mentioned above.
- The analysis of this poem has been published in another article: J. Kruczkowska (2011) 'Kings and Poets: Self-irony in Selected Poems by George Seferis and Derek Mahon', L. Gruszewska-Blaim and D. Malcolm (eds), *Essays on Modern British and Irish Poetry*, vol. 5, (Gdansk: University of Gdansk Press).
- ⁴ I have already discussed it elsewhere, in Chapter 2 of my Ph.D. dissertation, *The Role of Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry in the Context of the Conflict in Ulster* (Université Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle & University of Lodz, 2003, unpublished), under 'Identity' (p. 70-72).

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