

Pompous ass

TOWARDS the end of 1997, Seamus Heaney wrote to his friend Derek Mahon from Magdalen College, Oxford. ‘Amigo, Here briefly, at the fall of the leaf,’ he began, archly but affably. ‘The deer-park misty, the choir angelic, the heart aswim.’ Mahon had just published *The Yellow Book*, a collection of long-lined, sophisticated poems steeped in Baudelaire and the fin de siècle. Praising its ‘opulence of means and melodies, the *pleure dans le cœur*, the combination of buoyancy in the verse and ballast in the feeling’, Heaney concludes: ‘I see Milosz calls poetry a dividend from ourselves: high yields, *mon vieux*.’ Christopher Reid, the editor of this weighty selection of Heaney’s correspondence, adds disconcertingly: ‘Below the signature, in Mahon’s hand, on the actual letter in the Emory archive: “Pompous ass”.’

Was it unguarded of Heaney to take such pleasure in the haunts he had made

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