Paul Muldoon and the Language of Poetry

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Paul Muldoon and the Language of Poetry

By

Ruben Moi

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Cover illustration: *Letter Composition* (2013) from "LETTERS OF INTENT" (https://staringpoetics.weebly .com) [Digital media] by Nico Vassilakis.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Moi, Ruben, author.
Title: Paul Muldoon and the language of poetry / by Ruben Moi.
Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill Rodopi, [2020] | Series: Costerus new series, 0165–9618 ; vol. 228 | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019043272 (print) | LCCN 2019043273 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004355101 (hardback) | ISBN 9789004355118 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Muldoon, Paul--Criticism and interpretation. | Muldoon, Paul--Literary style.
Classification: LCC PR6063.U367 Z83 2020 (print) | LCC PR6063.U367 (ebook) | DDC 821/.914--dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2019043272
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019043273

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0165-9618
ISBN 978-90-04-35510-1 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-35511-8 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

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Acknowledgements

As Paul Muldoon's lifelong poetic project moves onwards, a few words of appreciation are due to academic colleagues, friends, family and creative people – frequently the same persons – who have inspired these lines during departmental symposia, seminars and conferences. Professor Charles Ivan Armstrong at the University of Agder, Norway, has provided invaluable cerebral companionship and honorable friendship over several years. Ample gratitude is due to Professor Stuart Sillars, Shakespeare scholar and professor emeritus from the University of Bergen, Norway, for productive suggestions and sound advice over almost the same span of time. Heartfelt appreciation is also due to my fellow colleagues at the same university, Professors of film studies and American literature, Asbjørn Grønstad and Lene Johannessen. The company of these friends has been sustaining spiritually and scholarly on a personal and professional level. Other colleagues in the field of contemporary Irish poetry have become solid friends. Professor Ben Keatinge has been invaluable for the completion of this book with his advice, humour and companionship. Professor Anne Karhio at the National University of Ireland, Galway, has provided articles, books and scholarly exchange for years. She also facilitated a very successful stay at the Moore Institute for Research in the Humanities and Social Studies at the NUI, Galway, which provided a haven for finishing the book. Along the way, I have been fortunate to benefit from a year's research visit at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University, Belfast, and from feedback and critical encouragement from such seniors in the field as Edna and Michael Longley, and the long list of staff and students at this intellectual and stimulating centre for contemporary poetry and writing. Publications, conferences and seminars with the international Border Aesthetics research group, conducted with such academic alacrity and social grace by Professors Stephen Wolfe and Johan Schimanski at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, have added ideas and motivation as well as fostering appropriate debate. Associate Professor Tim Saunders has been a source of intellectual inspiration and social comradeship inside, outside and in between the border group. UiT The Arctic University of Norway, the Norwegian Research Council and Ambasáid na hÉireann, The Irish Embassy in Oslo, have generously supported my research. Appreciation is also due, naturally, to Paul Muldoon himself for all his poetry, critical writing and public performances, and to all the scholars in the field, whose incisive insights provide corroboration and counterpoints for my own specific approach to Muldoon's poetry. More supportive and steadfast than any, Line Leonore Haugan Moi, my wife, has extended her interests and

unflagging support to my project and well-being. I would like to thank her for her love, compassion and care, and for her generosity in all respects, not least with our time. Needless to say, almost: the responsibility for the form and contents of this book rests entirely upon my own shoulders.

Ruben Moi

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations of Muldoon's publications are employed in the main text and footnotes. The books are published by Faber and Faber in London. Many of the same books are also published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux in New York. Muldoon has also published poetry volumes, plays and children's books with Wake Forest University Press in the United States and Gallery Press in Ireland.

NW	*New Weather*, 1973
M	*Mules*, 1977
WBL	*Why Brownlee Left*, 1980
Q	*Quoof*, 1983
MTB	*Meeting the British*, 1987
Mad	*Madoc*, 1990
AC	*The Annals of Chile*, 1994
H	*Hay*, 1998
TII	*To Ireland, I,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000
MSG	*Moy Sand and Gravel*, 2002
HL	*Horse Latitudes*, 2006
Mag	*Maggot*, 2010
OTTWK	*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, 2015

Introduction

'Quaat?' asks Derek Mahon appositely in his review of *Quoof*, Muldoon's outlandish fourth volume of poetry from 1983, and captures the uncanny side of the linguistic universe of Muldoon's poetry.[1] This Muldonic oddity intimates in its linguistic unintelligibility and semantic incomprehension the importance of language to his poetry, and some of the reasons why this topic invites in-depth analysis.[2] To single out language as sole concern of a critical exposition makes perfect sense with a poet who churns out words such as 'quoof,' 'wannigan,' and 'retinagraph' (*Mad*, 18); who 'cannot but, can't but hear a 'cunt' in the 'sil*ken* tent' in Frost's 'The Silken Tent'; who rhymes 'dear Sis' with '*metastasis*' (*HL*, 94); who draws idioms from multiple languages and calls Yeats '*Il Duce* of Drumcliffe' (*AC*, 145); who writes a poem on testicles, 'Balls' (*Mag*, 81) and who invents the following sentence in a poem on Wittgenstein (or is it Coleridge?): 'Now you stumparumper is a connoisorrow who has lost his raspectabilberry' (*Mad*, 219).[3] Furthermore, he writes a three-word poem entitled '[Kristeva]' (*Mad*, 260) on the famous post-structuralist feminist and he reviews Patricia Craig's *The Rattle of the North* as influenced by the 'recent attempt to establish a post-Barthes, or "Londonderridean" canon of Irish "writing."'[4] Muldoon's poetic language excels in Joycean lexicographic experimentalism, Yeatsian stanzaic solidity and Eliotic auditory imagination, and bears the hallmarks of recent language philosophy. In doing so, he not only

1 Derek Mahon, 'Quaat?' *New Statesman* (11 May 1983), 27–8.

2 Muldonic, Muldoonic, Muldoonesque and Muldoonish appear as precise adjectives to articulate hallmarks of Muldoon's poetry. Muldoon expresses disaffection with Muldoonian as a congealed concept, a cliché and a manifestation/reflection of the self-mannerism and the self-parody that he works hard to avoid. Patrick McGuinness, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2009), 103. Muldonic echoes sardonic, macaronic and all the phonics that his poetry frequently employs. Anthony Johnson defines this adjective as 'pertaining to dry, incisive and yet understated humour; expressing a quality of slant sharpness,' and his sprite reading of Muldoon's ekphrastic poem 'Sandro Botticelli: The Adoration of the Magi' enacts many associations of the adjective. 'The Adoration of the Maggot,' in *The Crossings of Art in Ireland*, ed. Ruben Moi, Charles Ivan Armstrong, and Brynhildur Boyce (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 261–281. Muldoonesque and Muldoonish offer connotations of different kinds. New terms for utter reduction into one word of Muldoon's comprehensive and versatile poetry also appear appropriate to the poet's own incessant experiments in linguistic vitality.

3 The only reference not included in the text, 'the silken tent,' is to Paul Muldoon, 'Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' *Essays in Criticism* XLVIII, no. 2 (1998), 117.

4 Paul Muldoon, 'Canon and Colcannon: Review of *The Rattle of the North* by Patricia Craig,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 October 1992, 22.

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vitalises and engenders language; he conceives new ways of dealing with the sorrows, felicities and humdrum of life, and the many forces of history and society that condition our human existence. Add to this showcase of Muldoon's language his enthusiasm for alphabetic atomism, his sensitivity to sounds and syntax, his heuristic explorations of grammar, his insatiable predilection for puzzles and conundrums and his incorporation of metalinguistic and language-theoretical issues, and the reasons for a book on this aspect of his poetry accumulate. The amount of critical resistance to and admonitions against Muldoonesque language over the years suggests a final justification for an extended exploration of the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry.[5]

This brief summation suggests the profound interest in the possibilities and pitfalls of language that characterises Muldoon's poetry from the very beginning and up to his latest book of poetry, from *New Weather* in 1973 to *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* in 2015. Preoccupations with the mysteries and the logic of language are also in evidence in his children's books, *The Noctuary of Narcissus Batt* and *The Last Thesaurus*, and his drama, particularly *The Birds*, his version of Aristophanes' comedy. Language appears as the most sustained point of debate in his many interviews over the years, and as the preeminent characteristic of his performative critical prose.[6] *To Ireland, I*, Muldoon's abecedary of Irish literature presents a primary example of his creative and critical idiom. Language, in all its forms, functions and failures, informs and energises Muldoon's poetics. His liberal lexicality – quoof – illustrates his insistently

5 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews summarises a long litany of impatience with Muldoon's language in the following question: 'To what extent is he merely a highly inventive but emotionally evasive joker playing a slippery, virtuous game of words and rhymes and allusions?' 'Introducing Paul Muldoon: "Arbitrary and Contrary,"' in *Paul Muldoon. Poetry, Prose, Drama*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006), 5. Many a commentator, reviewer and critic have answered affirmatively and exerted themselves to demonstrate, in their view, the extent of his lack of appropriate gravityand his flippant levity. See for example David Annwn, '*Why Brwonlee Left* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, no. 69 (1981), 74; Lynn Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 1 (1994), 1; Eve Patten, 'Clever, Comic, Liberating,' *Fortnight*, no. 291 (1991), 27; John Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' *The Sunday Times*, 21 June 1987, 56; Helen Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes,' *The New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1997, 59; Alan Holinghurst, 'Telling Tales: New Poetry,' *Encounter* 56, no. 2–3 (1981), 81; William Pratt, '*The Annals of Chile* by Paul Muldoon,' *World Literature Today* 69, no. 2 (1995), 365; Eamonn Grennan, 'Introduction: Contemporary Irish Poetry,' *Colby Quaterly* 28, no. 4 (1992), 189; John Mole, 'The Reflecting Glass,' *Encounter* 63, no. 3 (1984), 49.

6 See Muldoon's many reviews of films and books over the years and his criticism and essays in Paul Muldoon, 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' *Essays in Criticism* XLVIII, no. 2 (1998); *The End of the Poem* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006); *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

inquisitive and radical attitudes to language, which will be discussed in detail throughout the book but which can only be adumbrated in this introduction.

This concentration on language is not to say that Muldoon's poetry does not prompt a plethora of other thematic concerns and hermeneutic possibilities. Individual poems offer their own theme, each volume provides a network of concerns, some interests span long stretches of his authorship. Questions of identity and identification, hybridity and transformations, belonging and exile, idealism and realism, the Troubles, aesthetics, anguish, sorrow and humour make only a short list of themes that warrant hermeneutic interest in addition to his linguistic virtuosity. These themes, among others, will certainly be attended to in this book, but they will always be analysed within the medium of their articulation: language.

'The language is now in the keeping of the Irish,' Ezra Pound declared in 1928, with the exemplars of Joyce and Yeats foremost on his mind.[7] Eliot also pointed to Joyce and Yeats and critical tradition has to a large extent confirmed this dual aspect to the poetic dynamics of Irish poetry.[8] Due to their canonical status and the fact that they, like Muldoon, both came to prominence at a time of language contestation and national upheaval, these comparisons seem unavoidable. But Muldoon's poetry straddles the gap and explodes this dual framework: Muldoon's orientations in literature extend far beyond the island of Ireland. Nevertheless, poets from Ireland and Northern Ireland are still at the forefront of contemporary poetics. The award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Seamus Heaney in 1995 and the creative energies of the continuous Belfast group in- and outside of the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University appear as the crowning examples. The rapport between Muldoon and Heaney – whose poetry suggests a point of perpetual interpoeticality to and with

7 Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (London: Desmond and Harmsworth, 1931), 42.

8 T.S. Eliot, '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth' and 'Yeats' in Frank Kermode (ed.): *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 175–79, 248–58. For the conventional division of tradition between Yeats and Joyce in Irish literature, see Thomas Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer,' in *Davis, Morgan, Ferguson: Tradition and the Irish Writer*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin: Dolmen, 1970), 56–72; *The Dual Tradition. An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995); Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert F. Garrat, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986); Maurice Harmon, ed. *Irish Poetry after Yeats* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1979); Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Terence Brown, 'Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Critical Debate,' in *Ireland's Literature* (Mullingar: Lilliput, 1988), 77–90; Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?' in *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 98–115.

Muldoon – is only one result of this sodality of imagination and productive play on Bloomian anxiety.[9]

Yet Muldoon's canon of Irish writers ranges widely, and is unerringly contemporary. His editorship of *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986) and *Poetry Ireland Review* issue 100 (2010), his position as poetry editor of *The New Yorker* from 2007 to 2017, his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry and all his reviewing and criticism offer the best guides to his intimate exchange with the Irish and global arena of contemporary poetry. This poetic Hiberno-Anglo-American nexus, although a dominant one, does not diminish the Gaelic tenor of his poetry. The Gaelic tradition of Irish poetry is evident throughout his oeuvre and manifests itself in his collaborative work and translations.[10] As an international poet steeped in a plurivocal Irish tradition, Muldoon's language is accordingly multifaceted and complex.

Language, however, like Muldoon's poetry, is not easily defined. Viktor Shklovsky, in his insistence on form and artifice in literature, singles out language and horses as the two defamilarising strategies in his *ostranenie*, *verfremdungseffekt*, alienation – the technique of written art that estranges the subject from her- or himself and from our familiar situation in order to see ourselves and the condition of humanity anew.

9 For three essays on the rapport between Muldoon and Heaney, see Ruben Moi, 'Transtextual Conceptualizations of Northern Ireland,' in *Readings of the Particular: The Postocolonial in the Postnational*, ed. Anne Holden Rønning and Lene Johannessen (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 217–229; Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Heaney and Muldoon: Omphalos and Diaspora,' in *Paul Muldoon. Poetry, Prose, Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2006), 121–127; Neil Corcoran, 'A Languorous Cutting Edge: Muldoon Versus Heaney?' in *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 121–137. For a sound corrective to this apparently inseparable double bind, see Fran Brearton, '"Ploughing by the Tail": Longley, Muldoon and Anxiety of Influence,' *Nordic Irish Studies* 2, no. 1 (2003), 1–17.

10 Two of his translations are with Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, *The Astrakhan Cloak* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1993); *The Fifty Minute Maid* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2007). See also Eric Falci, 'Translations as Collaborations: Ni Dhomnaill and Muldoon,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Verse*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 328–340; David Wheatley, 'The Aistriúchán Cloak: Paul Muldoon and the Irish Language,' *New Hibernia Review* 5, no. 4 (2001), 123–134; '"That Blank Mouth": Secrecy, Shibboleths, and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 1 (2001), 1–16; Rui Carvalho Homem: *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 133–166.

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. … It is the horse's point of view (rather than a person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar.[11]

Horses are by far the most frequent animal to appear in Muldoon's poetry, all sorts of horses, also speaking ones. Alongside all his horses, linguistic beasts are even more common.

Adorno stresses the importance of language in his negative dialectics, his 'radically darkened art,' and in his essay on lyric poetry and society, in phrases that touch tangentially on parts of Muldoon's ideas of language and the performance of poetry: 'The lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches and accords with language itself, with inherent tendency of language.'[12] Muldoon's poetry is always language-obsessed, but frequently much more in exploration and discord with language, than accord. To a large number of critics, it would seem, his poetry often exists upon the margins of communication and comprehensibility, but this does not mean that it communicates nothing. Such a statement only indicates a resignation of human comprehension and aesthetic sensitivity. As Adorno's many expositions reveal: nothingness has profound meaning in radical thinking and art. Furthermore, Muldoon's poetry has always struck raw nerves and intellectual currency in its many contexts from Belfast to Boston, although much of his poetry appears far removed in metaphors and subject matter from the society with which it interacts so profoundly. Finally, to what extent Muldoon's poetry is lyrical is a moot point. His poetry is manifold,

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11 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique,' in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*, ed. Newton K.M. (London: Macmillan, [1916] 1997), 3–6.

12 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society,' in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, [1958] 1991), 37–55. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd, [1966] 1973); *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1970] 1997).

deviant, different. He always refracts, crosses, splices and undermines the convention and tradition within which the single poem might be placed. However, despite these nuances, Adorno's negative dialectics and his reflections on lyric poetry and society provide a philosophical template for much of Muldoon's poetry and Muldoon occupies himself compulsively with the inherent tendencies of language, as his many comments in, of and upon language below and throughout this book evince.

Derrida, closely followed by Wittgenstein, is by far the most language-obsessed philosopher of the last century. His inveterate anti-establishment animus and his whole critique of Western metaphysics is predicated upon the functions, flaws and farragos of language. His post-Sausurrean submersion in philosophy and literature is perpetually aware of the potential of language, and how radical language can breach the contexts that tend to provide its *raison d'être.* He writes of the written instances that attempt to open up for new knowledge of the past and to radical change for the future by questioning the structures of language, thought and knowledge:

> By alluding to a science of writing reined in by metaphor, metaphysics and theology, this exergue must not only announce that the science of writing – *grammatology* – shows signs of liberation all over the world, as a result of decisive efforts. These efforts are necessarily discreet, dispersed, almost imperceptible; that is a quality of their meaning and of their milieu within which they produce their operation. I would like to suggest above all that, however fecund and necessary the undertaking might be, and even if, given the most favourable hypothesis, it did overcome all technical and epistemological obstacles as well as all the theological and metaphysical impediments that have limited it hitherto, such a science of writing runs the risk of never being established as such with that name.[13]

Such instances of writing that liberate themselves from their ordinary precepts are not easily categorised or understood, and, consequently, constitue a threat to established reigns of reason:

> Here there is a kind of question, let us call it historical, whose *conception, form, gestation* and *labor* we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ

13 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, [1967] 1976), 4.

> these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing – but also with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the unnameable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.[14]

Derrida's grammatology, his framing of radicality as habitually frightening and his consistent literature-driven meditation, much of which has been edited by Derek Attridge in *Acts of Literature*, still retains its relevance for the philosophy of language and literary criticism.

How do you write of the unwriteable? In poetry? What would such writing be, could it ever be understood as anything else than abomination and monstrosity, and could it ever be explained? How do you make use of poetic forms that have congealed in contemporary currency long time ago? Or do you? Derrida's writing exerts itself to find moments and manners by which to articulate everything that makes us turn our eyes away: the inhuman, the shameful, the ununderstandable, and all the negative cognition and all the radically darkened precariousness of our human condition. Muldoon's writing correlates with Derrida's philosophical endeavours. His poetry bristles with anti-authoritarian irreverence and his profound insights into human darkness is conditioned by his living through the Troubles of Northern Ireland, and through the increasing dilemmas of American politics and wider global crises, social and political. Much of his poetry strives to comprehend these complexities in language-obsessed and language-intensive strangeness that courts the uncategorisable, the monstrous and the unintelligible, without necessarily succumbing to the dispiriting matter with which it grapples. Muldoon's poetry can be at its most profound and powerful exactly when his verses appear as alienated as Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, when they adhere to the dispirited dynamics and the human despair of Adorno, and when they are as linguistically introverted and on the cusp of intelligibility as Derrida's *grammatology*. Language is the principal concern to all of these four writers: Shklovsky, Adorno, Derrida and Muldoon.

Issues of language configured philosophical debate and aesthetic orientation throughout the previous century to such an extent that it was labelled the linguistic century long before it came to an end.[15] Language always denotes

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14 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, [1967] 1978), 293.

15 Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

communication, representation and imagination, but the main medium of human interaction is always surreptitiously predicated upon ideas that appear naturalised and which, consequently, deny their own hidden ideological import. Linguistic controversy in the previous century also disclosed how language is always beset with questions of identity, nation, gender, politics and philosophical skepticism about its own functions. Not least, theories of language made clear how language can alienate as much as accommodate, how the medium is always an embattled site for contestant socio-political, religious and popular discourses, and how language can be aporetic and conflictual as well as affirmative and communicative. If Derrida's philosophical meditations have been widely discredited as political evasiveness, metaphysical mysticism, cultural relativism and linguistic reductionism, there is little doubt that the avalanche of deconstruction that marked the apex of post-Saussurean semiotics has offered to poetry liberation from previous premises and presuppositions of language, poetry and criticism.[16] Muldoon avails himself of many of these tendencies. Naturally, an inveterate interest for the inscrutable functions and dysfunctions of the linguistic medium for more than forty years by an academic poet well versed in literary theory assumes numerous creative modes and figurations. *Quoof*, for example, suggests, among many interpretations, *ostranenie* – defamiliarisation – or making strange the relations between

16 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 127–151; *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 161–184; Richard Rorty, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 13–19; 'Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?' in *Working through Derrida*, ed. Gary B. Mason (Evaston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 137–146; 'Deconstruction and Circumvention,' *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (1984), 1–23. See also the protracted philosophical dispute over language between Derrida and Searle in for example Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context,' *Glyph* 1 (1977), 172–197; *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988); John R. Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,' *Glyph* 1 (1977), 198–208. For the easiest access to an abbreviated accumulation of Derrida's writing on literature, see Derek Attridge, ed. *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). For other discussions of poetry and culture in Ireland and Northern Ireland that engage with the multifarious writing of the French intellectual, see for example Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2001); Clair Wills, *Improprieties* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993). Other essays that attend to deconstructive readings of Muldoon's poetry are: Ruben Moi, '"In a Ghostly Pool of Blood / a Crumpled Phantom Hugged the Mud": Spectropoetic Presentations of Bloody Sunday and the Crisis of Northern Ireland' in *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 61–82; 'Mud Rooms, Plots and Slight Returns: What Is the Point of Paul Muldoon's Postmodernist Play in Hay?' in *New Voices in Irish Criticism*, ed. Karen Vandevelde (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), 108–115.

language and whatever dark reality it is to which it refers – cognitive, emotional, material or ineffable – as much as that reality in itself. In all its monstrosity, this linguistic beast appears on the arena of contemporary poetic language.

The quoof, the ostranenie and the creativity of the deconstructive impulse in Muldoon's poetic language facilitate the exchange between the linguistically hermetic and the social, and, furthermore, revitalise poetry itself by questioning its own creativity, form and language, and by turning into a generative source a language that harbours its own alterity and failures. This is a view of language in which large parts of Muldoon's poetry excel. His creative idiom thrives on the skepticism, plunders the pitfalls, and maximises the minutiae of language and several of his poems exacerbate and evaluate in artistic form many a deconstructive strategy and philosophical argument. But where deconstructive impetus energises his poetry, traces the purport of philosophy and deregulates the barriers between them, it also jeopardises the poetic and prompts the problems of relativism – and provides ammunition to his critical detractors. The mystic, quoofian, polysemantic title and multidiscursive experiments of *Madoc* offer a specimen of his deconstructive creativity and its concomitant problems. This volume appears as the apex of Muldoon's language experimentalism as much as the apogee of his postmodernist *adlinguisticism*.

Adlinguistic and deconstructive thought-processes characterise all of Muldoon's poetry. Such language-conscious creativity develops from the very beginning, reaches its climax in *Madoc*, and remains an established feature throughout his writing. After *Madoc*, however, these eye-stabbing, ear-battering and mind-thwarting parts of his poetry assume a less confrontational form. They often take on more popular and pleasing guises. The title of Muldoon's tenth collection, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, indicates that construction has gained ascendency over deconstruction in Muldoon's poetry. The concentration on language moves from linguistic atomism, language-philosophical issues and dissemination of meaning towards longer units of sentence, popular idiom and construction of sense. Undoubtedly, there were fewer phenomena left to inspect after *Madoc*, but this volume also raises the level for language-inspired poetry in the volumes to come. Muldoon's poetry changes throughout his 45-year career, but his engagement with language remains a constant element in his work.

For all its restive rapport with post-structuralist multidiscursivity, Muldoon's sensitivity to shifts in glossary and to phonic features, to tones and registers, enables him to retain a strong link to social situations and imbues his poetry with subversive potency. Often the overarching agendas, creeds, postulates and rhetoric, under which the Muldonic voices erupt with wry wit and profound compassion, with sedition and contempt and with sadness and humour,

are recorded in the poetic fabric. At other times voices confront each other freely in grander narratives and social situations, in pub patter and street talk, in slang and in idiosyncratic idioms. Parts of Muldoon's poetry allow for sleeve notes, general admission and the infantile. As well as linguistically introvert, Muldoon's language can be very popular – but hardly ever populist.[17]

To point to the creative powers of intertextuality, language-centered speculation and popular idiom in a politicised and ideologically divided environment for Muldoon's literary arts and its interpretations – Muldoon showed his first poem to Heaney in 1968, the year after Derrida's biblioblitz, the first year of The Troubles – does not exclude the formative impetus of other fields: language is not easily defined and it comes from many places. However much the language of Muldoon's poetry has developed in a time of linguistic scrutiny, his background is close to being linguistically post-structuralist *avant la lettre*.[18] Invariably, not least in Ireland, language is caught up in the binary contentions of nationality and politics. Although other languages, French and Latin in particular, have influenced both languages of the dual Irish tradition, Irish poetry is normally defined by verses written in Gaelic or English.[19] Traditions and variations in Irish language and Muldoon's own linguistic background supply important contexts for the study of language in his poetry. Muldoon grew up in at least two languages and abundant linguistic variety; his poetry is also predicated upon these conditions. The linguistic fare under the Hiberno-Anglo-American archway also resounds with other accents and accentuations. Born, bred and educated in an Irish-English environment in which Mass was still conducted in Latin, before moving to America, Muldoon was exposed to the sounds and semantics as well as the powers and politics of different languages

17 'Sleeve Notes' (*H*, 29–52) shows one popular side of Muldoon's idiom and reference. See also his song lyrics, 'My Ride's Here' and 'Macgillycuddy's Reeks' for rock musician Warren Zevon's album *My Ride's Here* (Artemis Records, 2002), and all his lyrics for the Handsome Family and his own bands Rackett and Rogue Oliphant in *General Admission* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2006); *The Word on the Street* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); *Sadie and the Sadist* (London: Eyewear Publishing, 2017).

18 Robert Potts, 'The Poet at Play,' *The Guardian* (12 May 2001), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/may/12/poetry.artsandhumanities, accessed 5 April 2017. For the four books by Derrida originally published in 1967, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976); *Positions* (London: Athlone, 1987); *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973); *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978).

19 Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) and Ciaran Carson's *First Language* (1993) are pointed reminders of the different language traditions in Ireland. For a collection of scholarly essays on the importance of Latin in Ireland, see Jason Harris and Keith Sidwell, eds., *Making Ireland Roman* (Cork: Cork University, 2009).

as a young child, pupil, altar boy and student in a language-conscious and media-covered community of several national and religious traditions, not to mention local, social and personal language variations. In 'The Point of Poetry' Muldoon specifies language production as a distinct human capacity and accounts for his introduction to current poetry in school and Latin in church, and recounts a telling story of emergent language formation: 'The urge to set down words in particular patterns is one of our most basic impulses,' he states and continues: 'I had a healthy irreverence for the Latin we were meant to be solemnly intoning in our responses at Mass, so that "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," became "Me a cowboy, me a cowboy, me a Mexican cowboy."'[20] In a modest version of Dantean vernacularisation, Muldoon evinces his typical anti-establishment animus – whether it is against institutions or orthodoxy of any type – his aptitude for altering perspectives, and his predilection for undercutting humour in this instance by crossing clerical Latin with a popular idiom in pitch-perfect prosody and alliterative alphabetisation. The tack of tone, but not tune, also testifies to his interest in musicality.

To take into consideration the background of the poet is not to say that this book will be guided by biographical information. Given the specific topic of this book, interpretation and discussion of Muldoon's poetic language largely refrain from using biographical details. Still, the author's own comments upon the topic of language are included in the discussion of this book's main concern: *Paul Muldoon and the Language of Poetry*.[21] Perhaps it seems flawed to appropriate separate statements from a long life in letters for general hermeneutic uses, particularly in the case of Muldoon who distances himself from this potential fallacy, and who, naturally, offers disparate responses to similar issues on various occasions. On the contrary: it is precisely due to the frequency, continuity and specificity of the author's reflections upon the subject that his comments on language could be assigned some weight.

'I'm in awe of the language,' Muldoon professes and adds: 'I consider it important that I shouldn't have preconceptions, or that if I have them they shouldn't get in the way of language.'[22] Obviously, language is of importance to any writer – as dance to the dancer, music to the musician or paint to the

20 Paul Muldoon, 'The Point of Poetry,' *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 59, no. 3 (1998), 511.

21 For biographic information on Paul Muldoon, see the official Paul Muldoon Home Page, http://www.paulmuldoon.net/ and 'A Tight Wee Place in Armagh,' *Fortnight*, no. 206 (1984), 19–23; Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1996), 9–24; Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), 16–20; Jefferson Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2008), 1–9.

22 John Haffenden, *Viewpoints* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 137.

painter – but what distinguishes Muldoon's relations to the galaxy of linguistic phenomena from other poets' is his unassailable prioritisation of language, his enduring metalinguistic focus and his incessant probing into its improbabilities as much as its possibilities. He also argues that 'the poet must shoulder his responsibility to the language,' and from the very beginning and up to now, he has sustained an ever-expanding immersion in the multiple functions of language, and their shifting and interrelated underlying rationale.[23] Muldoon also allocates portions of his responsibility to the features of language that resist rationalisation. Liberal lexicality, neologism, homonymy, sound confusion, puns and all those befuddlements of language that have been eclipsed by Platonic philosophy, Aristotelian poetics and Addisonian wit belong to Muldoon's artistic licence.[24] Time and again, his poetry reveals a devotion to the inner mysteries of language, an apparently contradictory attitude to the linguistic matter of fact. Muldoon is often urged towards the 'esoteric or pied' and 'the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible,' much of which he considers typically Irish.[25] Not only can language be deployed for exclusion, secretiveness, disinformation and irrationality, sometimes language operates that way itself, and the task of detecting those moments and their coming into language suggests another source of poetic creativity. To cultivate and venerate, more than reveal and explicate, these hidden, irretrievable and inexplicable elements imbue parts of the poetry with an almost metaphysical aura. Muldoon's way with language, or perhaps the opposite, language's way with Muldoon, includes a stratum of linguistic hermeticism. The inner mysteries of language, the aspects that do not reveal themselves or resist ordinary reason, invite meditation and suffuse his poetry with attractive resistance.

No book-length study has yet been published on the language of Muldoon's poetry. In respect of the conspicuous linguistic cynosure of his poetry, and of the philosophical investigations into and critical discussions of language throughout his career, it is remarkable that this important aspect receives so little critical attention, and when it does, that it is so superficial and frequently misguided. Still, a number of books on Muldoon's poetry have already been

23 Muldoon, 'The Point of Poetry,' 515.

24 In Plato's philosophy, for example *Phaedrus* and books I, II, VII and X of *The Republic*, art and poetry are tertiary to ideality and reality, and writing an imposition upon inner truth, speech and memory. In *Poetics* Aristotle lists language with melody and spectacle as the third constituent element after plot and character. In the typical rational sense of the Augustan period Addison attributes many of the linguistic features in which Muldoon excels to 'false wit.' Joseph Addison, Richard Sir Steele, and Gregory Smith, *The Spectator*, 4 vols., vol. 1, Everyman's Library Edited by Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, 1907), 189–194.

25 Paul Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (London: Faber, 2000), 5.

published. The most recent one is Anne Karhio's *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Place*.[26] Her book is the only one to approach his poetry within a particular thematic framework, a commendable choice as three general introductions to his poetry already exist. Tim Kendall's *Paul Muldoon* established the terrain with his pioneering analysis of Muldoon's poetry up to *The Annals of Chile* in 1994. Clair Wills' *Reading Paul Muldoon* covers much of the same period up to *Hay* in 1998, with noticeably more traces of theoretical impulse. Jefferson Holdridge's *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon* extends the span of interpretation to include *Horse Latitudes* from 2006. Their monographs define and discuss a great number of ground-breaking issues with admirable clarity and concision. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews' and Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald's collection of essays, *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama* and *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* both showcase a diversity of specific approaches to his writing. Of these essays, Peter Denman's '"O Mould-Breaker, and Pun-Maker": Paul Muldoon and the Prosody of Letter' is formidable in its concentration on the force of language in Muldoon's poetry.[27] With a marksman's eye for the minutiae of linguistic nuance and a finely calibrated vocabulary, Denman conducts a rigorously text-constrained analysis. He has recourse to Saussure's 'hypograms' to detect and draw attention to significant and fascinating subtleties in the distribution of phonemes, keywords, letters and rhymes in the phrases of Muldoon's poetry. His essay is by far the most precise targeting of Muldoon's linguistic arsenal. His exposition of language intricacies is as commendable as it is debatable: the importance of language in poetry, particularly Muldoon's, needs no justifications. Adorno would agree. Denman's strategies and intentions run very much parallel to the aims of this book, but the commendable clear-cut focus of his essay can be expanded from a few poems to Muldoon's *oeuvre*. For all the auto-linguistic engineering and alphabetic energies that motor Muldoon's poetic drives, his poetry always relates, not only to other textual formations and cognitive concepts but also, however indirectly and obscurely, to the society with which it interacts. Jonathan Allison's essay, '"Everything Provisional": Fictive Possibility and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson,' suggests some of the directions these unsettled relations between linguistic centripetallation and intellectual meditation might take.[28] Allison correlates modality of verbs with mundane gravity. The association of one of Muldoon's

26 Anne Karhio, *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Place* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).

27 Peter Denman, '"O Mould-Breaker and Pun-Maker": Paul Muldoon and the Prosody of the Letter,' in *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, ed. Elmer Kennedy Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2006), 19–36.

28 Jonathan Allison, '"Everything Provisional": Fictive Possibility in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson,' *Etudes Irlandaises* 20, no. 2 (1991), 87–93.

linguistic specificities, his use of subjunctive and conditional modality with speculations on the human condition and restrictions thereof, particularly during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, illuminates one particular interpretation that can be derived from Muldoon's language-conscious features. Denman's structural semiotics and Allison's analysis of the modality of verbs point to ways of correlating the language of Muldoon's poetry with cognitive speculation.

Finally, Bernard O'Donoghue's important book, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, paves the way for this one. At the time of O'Donoghue's book in 1994 and the Nobel award to Heaney in 1995, Heaney had been labelled too political by Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edna Longley, not political enough by David Lloyd, a nationalist by Seamus Deane, a mythmaker by Ciaran Carson, a male chauvinist by Patricia Coughlan, a traditionalist by Robert McLiam Wilson, a Girardian structuralist by Jonathan Hufstader, a modernist by Stephen Matthews and a postmodernist by Thomas Docherty.[29] Desmond Fennel and John Wilson Foster, in critical and acclamatory terms respectively, pointed to the unique position of Heaney's poetry and Michael Parker offered the most comprehensive presentation of his poetry, life and contexts in *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*.[30] O'Donoghue singled out language as the principal concern of his research: 'A sustained focus on language affords an enlightening – indeed, the most enlightening – critical approach to any

29 Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A Slow North-East Wind. Review of Heaney's *North*,' *The Listener*, 25 September 1975, 404–405; Edna Longley, '"Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeaur"? Seamus Heaney's *North*' in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), 140–170; David Lloyd, '"Pap for the Dispossessed": Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity,' in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 13–41; Seamus Deane, 'Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold,' in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 174–187; Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Masssacre?' *The Honest Ulsterman* 50, no. 175 (1975), 183–186; Patricia Coughlan, '"Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,' in *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. Toni O´Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1991), 88–111; Robert McLiam Wilson, 'The Glittering Prize,' *Fortnight*, no. 344 (1995), 23–25; John Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Stephen Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstonge: Macmillan, 1997); Thomas Docherty, 'Ana-; or, Postmodernism, Landscape, Heaney,' in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (London: Harvetser-Wheatsheaf, 1991), 68–80.

30 Desmond Fennel, '"Whatever You Say, Say Nothing": Why Seamus Heaney Is No. 1,' (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991); John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995); Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

writing.'[31] His focus is restorative and salutary. His 'abiding purpose' 'to examine the effectiveness of Heaney's language in the light of his poetry,' and his approach 'to chart chronologically the changes in that language and Heaney's commentary on it,' sets signposts for the linguistic cynosure and the structure of this book too.[32] Muldoon's poetry and his numerous comments on language provide the main justification for the concentration on language, and for the volume by volume inspection of his poetry in this study. O'Donoghue's linguistic analysis of Heaney's poetry is laudable for other reasons too: for its exclusion of biographical information and historical reference, for its sensitivity to the cross-fertilisation of Irish and English, for its canonical consciousness and intertextual correspondences, and for its extremely agile critical debate. O'Donoghue also demonstrates awareness of theoretical approaches, metalinguistic speculation and deconstructive tendencies. However, this awareness appears mainly in the introduction. Furthermore, his awareness of recent language philosophy and its impact on poetic analysis hardly ever enters into his interpretation of the poetry. A noticeable difference can be discerned here, between the two poets, Heaney and Muldoon, and between 'O'Donoghue's and this critical endeavour: Heaney's temper tends to be constructive and conformist; Muldoon's to be deconstructive and iconoclastic. The attention to post-structuralist cognition differs distinctively in both their critical and creative idiom. Heaney, and O'Donoghue, often imply an acquaintance of this language-philosophical complexity. Muldoon, in contrast, frequently demonstrates detailed perspicuity, and declares a catalogue of responses – celebration, critique, disgruntlement, pastiche, abandonment – in both his commentary and in his creative writing; plays, essays, reviews and children's books as well as his poetry. The reading of Muldoon's poetry and other texts in this book also draws upon the hermeneutic energies brought to the research of literature by Parisian philosophers from Barthes and Foucault to Derrida and Kristeva. Derrida, of the four, tends to be the one who has engaged most vividly with literature and language. Thus, this book is the first one to attend comprehensively to Muldoon's poetry from his debut volume *New Weather* in 1973 to his last two volumes *Maggot* in 2010 and *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* 2015. It is also the first one to analyse his poetry under the aegis of language hermeneutics.

A rigorously language-limited approach to Muldoon's poetry pares down the possible parameters of interpretation for a number of reasons. Muldoon's

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31 Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Langue of Poetry* (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1994), 1.

32 Ibid.

poetry is so immensely rich that one has no choice but to impose a selective focus upon current research into his poetry, particularly after Kendall, Wills and Holdridge's books. A reduction of panoramic possibilities to a singular feature, arguably his most characteristic one, actually provides more space for detailed analysis to realise fully the ingenuity of his art. New studies of particular aspects of his art, like Karhio's, will bring novel perspectives to the existent hermeneutic discourses that have already been brought to bear on his poetry. Consequently, this book limits its scope to language, not as one element among many, but as the driving force that encompasses thematic concerns and stylistic choices. Such a singular focus of interest will bring with it new implications for the present state of research into Muldoon's poetry. First of all, a language-oriented approach will direct attention to many of those poems that are often neglected in studies of Muldoon. A critical tendency not to take his experiments with language seriously has obscured many poems from interpretation and critical debate. A change of critical perspective will bring into focus a lot of poems that have received little analysis, or in many cases, none at all. Primarily, these poems reveal other aspects of his aesthetic diversity than those frequently elaborated, but they also reflect how his ways with language cannot be separated from the concerns of the poems that have received far more attention. Consequently, and second, a strong focus on language will also bring out new ideas in poems that have been much discussed in the light of other critical approaches. Furthermore, a language-defined means of interpretation allows for the inclusion of tendencies from, and discussions of, his modes of language in the works that tend to be categorised otherwise than poetic: his plays, prose, children's books, translations and collaborations with other artists. Finally, such an approach promotes the insertion of Muldoon's poetry into other critical perspectives very relevant to Muldoon's own poetry, for example: the language traditions and linguistic variety in and of Ireland; the heritage of Latin, classical and continental culture; questions of translation; the multidiscursive mêlée in and of America; the philosophy of language.

Proverbially, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Muldoon's innovative poetic language is best captured by new critical idioms. Taking the cue from Muldoon's own creative improvisation and philosophical purview, this analysis of his poetic language will also depend upon new critical coinages in an attempt to illustrate better Muldonic novelty. Some of them will be presented here. *Alphaphilia* refers to the author's lust for letters and his linguipotence, *audiofetishism* to his sense of insouciant sounds and perfect prosody, and *adlinguisticism* to his reconstellations of syntactic structures and grammatical order and his inclination to explore the linguistics of non-representationality. As opposed to Eliot, Muldoon, particularly in his early career, deploys

numerous *sub*jective correlatives: an idiosyncratic assembling in experimental form of alphabetic acoustics, textual heterogeneities and semantic disparity in which paronomastic pandemonium and linguistic licence integrate autobiographical elements, local significance and cosmic scales for multidiscursive productivity. By contrast, *alterratives* points to the integral aspects of alterity in the multiple modes of unfolding alphabetic composition, identification and the dimensions of unrealised life and possibilities. *Narrathanotography*, on the other hand, renders new modes of conceptualising in aporetic language and aberrant narration the movements of a differentiated self towards annihilation. *P@stmodernism* derives from '@,' Muldoon's inspection of ethical civilisatory concerns in a sign-created poem. The Muldonic idiom describes poems that engage with ethical civilisatory consequences of what appears to be only a question of minimal linguistic interest. Poems such as 'Quoof' and 'Crossing the Line' can be categorised by this term, but the 'p@stmodernist' poems from 'The Plot' to '@' mainly appear after *Madoc*, which tends to explore and explode most powerfully the theories and terminology of postmodernist discourses.

Muldoon's exciting excursions into the realm of alphabetic aesthetics and linguistic valency amount to far more than an arid accumulation of adlinguisticity. Despite the fact that some of his poems are entirely immersed in their own letters and lines, sometimes apparently severed from any speaking subject, social situation or historical condition, they always place themselves actively in the conceptualisations thereof, and in cognitive processes that clearly interpellate the governing ideas of identity, social emergency and the formative forces of the past. Although Muldoon personally distances himself from any activist agenda, he has also admonished critics for under-estimating the political dimensions of his poetry.[33] To the extent that linguisticisation towers as the quintessential hallmark of postmodernism, it is relevant to remember that Edna Longley, more than thirty years ago, suggested that Northern Ireland is the natural site of the postmodern, and several other critics cast the nation in the terms of ever-shifting signification.[34]

33 In response to a question on how much he was affected by the Troubles as a young man Muldoon states: 'I think there's been a tendency to underplay my response in the poems.' AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *The Observer*, 15 November 1998, 14. More comments by Muldoon on the relations of poetics and politics can be found in Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 17; Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 29; Kevin Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' *Rhinoceros*, no. 4 (1991), 77.

34 Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986), 194; Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*; Stefanie Lehner, *Subaltern Ethics in Contemporary Scottish and Irish Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For a number of critical

'Quoof,' a linguistic sibling to *Madoc* and a strange sonnet of enigmatic encounters in familiar settings on foreign territory, ends on a note of linguistic premonition: 'like the smouldering spoor of the yeti / or some other shy beast / that has yet to enter the language' (*Q* 17). The evident self-reference to the probable fate of the title word also captures Muldoon's entrances into the mysteries and outlandish reaches of a linguistic topography that appears reminiscent to us all from other places. 'If I knew where poems came from, I'd go there,' fellow poet Michael Longley says.[35] Language is certainly one of the many regions whence poetry comes, and Muldoon spends a lot of time there.

approaches to Muldoon, which can be collected under the umbrella 'postmodernism,' see 'The Poetry of Northern Ireland' in Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), 121–137; John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 192–199, 251–59, 95–301.

35 Quoted from the blurb of Robin Robertson, ed. *Love Poet, Carpenter: Michael Longley at Seventy* (London: Enitharmon, 2009).

CHAPTER 1

New Weather

New Weather precipitated upon the poetic scene with 'all the appearance of a monstrous refrain.'[1] Wright's comment echoes Shklovsky's sense of alienation, Adorno's attention to the radically dark and Derrida's idea of monstrosity. His observation also singles out the position of language in Muldoon's poetry. By a whimsical typographical mishap, Muldoon's first and critically acclaimed volume in 1973 ended up being printed in italics. This unfortunate error caused the 'monstrous' alienation. The misprint and its evaluation by Wright probably also funnelled Muldoon's language energies, as misprisions and apparently unaccountable italics remain characteristic features of all his poetry. Certainly, this unexpected deviancy from ordinary print standards heralded the iteration in Muldoon's poetry of the beastly, the alienated and the *unheimlich*, but it also occasioned his incessant incorporation of citations, whether they are acknowledged, as in some places, or not, as is frequently the case. Furthermore, the quirkiness of the extended *italicisation* and its many implications – citation, irony, otherness, distance – highlight the paradoxicality and aporetic operations of language, all the moments when language communicates more or less than what is immediately apparent, when it turns against itself, contradicts itself, and does not add up – all the incongruities of language that Muldoon so often deploys for unsettling and polysemous effects. The very graphic aberrancy also points to his wayward imagination, to his proclivity for choosing concerns out of the ordinary, and to those instances that counteract the concept or tradition from which they depart. Strikingly, of course, the misprision salutes serendipity as an important factor in his creativity, just as much as the extended character of the anomaly intimates the type of mannerism for which he has often been critiqued. In all respects, this fortuitous happenstance highlights Muldoon's multifarious meanderings in language throughout his career, but also many of the specific features of *New Weather* itself.

The social crisis in Northern Ireland of the 1970s raised questions about the moral responsibility of the arts, and about the capacity of language to express the chaotic situation and to address the unspeakable atrocities. Still, few poets seemed to doubt the solidity of language and its ability to refer, however obliquely, to the vagaries of politics and conflict without troubling the medium

1 Christopher Wright, 'Vaguely Nouvelle: *New Weather* by Paul Muldoon,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 April 1973, 442.

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itself. Thomas Kinsella accepts, with an underlying tone of historical determinism, the displaced and fractured language position of the contemporary poet as 'gapped, discontinuous, polyglot' and resigns himself to pessimism: 'I am certain that a great part of the significance of my own past, as I try to write my poetry, is that that past is mutilated.'[2] But this unsatisfactory condition of language is a result of history, not a linguistic phenomenon in itself. As opposed to Kinsella's acceptance of fractured conditions, Michael Hartnett attempted to overcome fissures by reverting to writing in Gaelic in the 1970s. In spite of his acute awareness of the two traditions of Irish language, Heaney distances himself firmly from any conception of language as not always being identical to itself.[3] Questions of identity, history and nation tend to exclude any scepticism towards language itself in these poet's reflections on the artistic medium. Nor is destabilised language a prominent feature in Michael Longley, Derek Mahon or Frank Ormsby's poetry. Even in the self-reflexive language of Ciaran Carson, frictions ensue more from historical contingency, national difference and social conditioning than from the problematics of language itself.

In Muldoon's verses the reverse tends to be the case. Together with a growing awareness and acceptance of the inconsistencies of his own artistic medium, his discontent with the soldering of poetic language to the imperatives of the political situation amounts to another occasion for resorting to a language that is split against itself. Like his fellow poets, Muldoon admits to the significance of Northern Ireland in his balancing of aesthetic awareness and social situation, but only with a wariness and distrust that set him apart from those fellow poets:

> Poems about the Irish 'situation'? The Irish situation is a terrible albatross. Somehow if you don't approach it, you're copping out. If you do approach it, you're cashing in. You can never win.[4]

Another comment acknowledges the same problem, but also proposes some strategies for dealing with it, many of which are deftly deployed in this volume, to avoid too direct involvement with the crisis:

2 Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer,' 66.

3 For Heaney's reservations against deconstructionist thinking and Muldoon's poetry, see 'The Prenatal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry,' in *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 36–53.

4 Kathleen McCracken, 'A Northern Perspective: Dual Vision in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990), 101.

> Yes, a poem does make a comment, if you live in a society, you're bound to reflect what happens in that society. That becomes complicated in the case of living in Northern Ireland. The poems I've written about the political situation there tend to be oblique, and I think properly so: they tend to look slightly farther back at the society from which the situation erupted, at *why* we are how we are now.[5]

In this respect, all the citational incertitude, haunting self-alienation and random reality of the italicisation in the first edition of *New Weather*, 'the monstrous refrain,' reflect the fractured conditions of language, but also give new impetus to the poetic language, in responding to the fraught conditions to which it relates. In 1973, at the peak of military conflict and in the wake of Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland, Muldoon articulates in *New Weather* an impatience with the orientations of his contemporary society, and presents new departures in the artistic temperament, which may also chart variations in the political climate.

The beastly, strange and bristly texture of the italicised verses is also captured with craft and cunning by the frontispiece hedgehog. In Irish nature poetry, the hedgehog is a rare animal, but it survives from the hinterland of Aesop's fable of canniness and compassion to make a rare appearance at the beginning of Muldoon's writing, only to disappear in his metaphorical fauna of dogs, birds and cows and, first and foremost, his consistent fascination with horses. As opposed to the extinct Irish elk, the hedgehog still survives as a symbol of the human race at risk of precipitating its extinction by its own means of protection or unchecked technological progress. Sombre associations like these form a backdrop to the fragile customs and lore from which many of the poems in the volume take their inspiration. 'Hedgehog' itself retains a mythological backdrop while it burrows into the individual psychology, collective mentality and religious atmosphere of Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. However, it is as a creature of creative language, Muldoon's in particular, that the metaphor assumes its most vital abrasiveness and vulnerability. Shklovsky regards language and horses as two vital types of alienation. This estranged combination runs continuously throughout Muldoon's poetry. There is little doubt that this Muldonic manifestation of language and hedgehog offers unique, interrogative and recalcitrant *ostranenie*. Quite naturally, the hedgehog works as a symbol of all the languages that have already been decimated by standardisation and global language processes. Even more, in its rarity and beastliness the hedgehog appears as a striking visual symbol of the scarcity

5 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 136–137.

and otherness of poetic language: an art which is often unseen by large strata of the society to which it relates with circumspection.

> We say, Hedgehog, come out
> of yourself and we will love you.
>
> We mean no harm. We want
> only to listen to what
> you have to say. We want
> your answers to our questions.
>
> The hedgehog gives nothing
> away, keeping itself to itself. (27)

Silent, like a poem enfolded upon its own secrets, the hedgehog refrains from changing form, and resists the impositions of the crowd. The stern syntax and the pressing demands from a collective group reveal that the apparently inexplicable reticence and incertitude of the frightened mammal may not be unwarranted. In its distinctiveness and silent secrecy, 'Hedgehog' could reflect in general the New Critical separation of the poetic from referential language and its hermeticism appears as an exemplary emblem of Empson's self-inwoven simile, which occurs repeatedly in this volume.[6] Similarly, the internal problems of an aesthetic that turns inwards towards itself and away from representational affinities at a time of war shares many similarities with Adorno's aesthetic theories and his call for 'a radically darkened art.'[7] One might argue that the technical achievement, accessible imagery and broad vocabulary of Muldoon's collection are incompatible with Adorno's ideas of negative aesthetics and 'radically darkened art,' yet as a symbol of poetry in general, and Northern Irish poetry throughout the Troubles in particular, the hedgehog captures, from an alternative perspective, the panorama of Adorno's ontological

6 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth Press, [1930] 1984), 160–161.

7 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 19. Adorno continues: 'In the face of the abnormity into which reality is developing, art's inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself into its innermost fiber. Yet art is not to be dismissed simply by its abstract negation. By attacking what seemed to be its foundation throughout the whole of its tradition, art has been qualitatively transformed; it itself becomes qualitatively other. It can do this because through the ages by means of its form, art has thus turned against the status quo and what merely exists just as much as it has come to its aid by giving form to its elements. Art can no more be reduced to the general formula of consolation than to its opposite.'

post-war pessimism. In retrospect, however, it seems very clear that poetry, particularly in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, did not hover on the brink of extinction or inarticulation; on the contrary, poetry from this conflict-ridden province reverberated throughout the world.[8] Thus, in its autotelic and hermetic defence reflexes, which threaten to precipitate its own demise by turning in on itself, it makes even more sense to regard the symbol of the hedgehog as a timid beast of Derridean deconstruction, a poetic language-creature that only survives by its suicidal defences.

In ‘Che cos’é la poesia?’ Derrida meditates upon the hedgehog as a figure for the fragility of the poetic. In typical manner, his essay collapses the distinctions of the critical and creative idiom, and the boundaries between what he is writing about and what his writing is doing in this convoluted crisis of letters that the *hérrison* presents:

> In order to respond to such a question – in two words, right? – you are asked to know how to renounce knowledge. And to know it well, without ever forgetting it: demobilize culture, but never forget in our learned ignorance what you sacrifice on the road, in crossing the road.[9]

This is the hedgehog on the road, rolling itself into a spiky ball, risking its own death by protective measures, defending itself at the peril of its own extinction. Derrida’s essay traces ‘the poematic’ – the bristly and brittle vagaries of the linguistic that upset the general traffic of language and point to concealed moments of thought and culture – the gift of the poetic and the poem and Mallarmé’s remarkable sonnet, ‘Don du Poème’ – all those hedgehogy aspects

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8 Neil Corcoran terms the Troubles and the poetry that mediated this prolonged crisis ‘the most significant influential factor on the subsequent history not only of Britain and Ireland, but also of contemporary ‘English’ poetry.’ Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940*, 136. In his magisterial survey of Irish poetry Goodby maintains: ‘It is a fact of modern literary history that Irish poetry has, since the early 1960s, flourished as never before.’ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 1. Already in 1982 Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion summarise: ‘The new spirit in British poetry began to make itself felt in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s and early 70s.’ *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1982), 12. Anthony Bradley confirms the significant position of Northern Irish poetry in ‘Contemporary Irish Poetry: The North’s Hegemony,’ *Contemporary Literature* 41, no. 2 (2000), 359–367. For a survey of younger writers who made their debut after the ceasefire in 1994, see Sinead Morrissey and Stephen Connolly, eds., *The Future Always Makes Me So Thirsty: New Poets from the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2016); Selina Guinness, ed. *The New Irish Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004).

9 Jacques Derrida, ‘Che Cos’è La Poesia?’ in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 221–240.

of poetic language that offer themselves discontinuously as new beginnings. Derrida's writing within and upon the poetic threatens to obliterate its singularity by interrogating its specificity: many of Muldoon's poems question their own precepts or trace their own dissolution to such an extent that their status as poetry becomes seriously jeopardised. The poetic, according to Derrida, traverses the many rotes of heartfelt desire to learn by repetition, retreats from the clamour of critical claims, and travels the routes of translations – the memorisation, canonisation critical debate and translations that keep the poetic alive by the threats of automating, silencing and transforming it. The poematic is neither essential nor ephemeral, neither pure nor poetry. By turning in on itself the peculiar beast spikes in all directions, while being blind to future movements. It brings into being a type of poematic armory in Muldoon's poetry that brings the poetic close to extinction by relentless questioning of its own specificity and points towards his many *alterratives* and *narrathanotographies*, for example in *Madoc.* And the type of poematic that turns inward to guard its secrets and never forgets what might be sacrificed by crossing the road describes well the nature of *New Weather*, *Mules* and *Why Brownlee Left*. In these volumes, many of the verses turn in on their own idiom, form and tradition, as much as they turn against conventional reception and contextual discourse.

Self-immersed, the hedgehog in 'Hedgehog' conveys linguistic inflection, poetic involution and artistic introversion. The natural creature's secretiveness and taciturnity represent the guarding of the tongue and the many unspeakable acts in the volume, for example prostitution and illicit moonshine in 'Kate Whiskey'; folkloristic healing in 'The Cure for Warts'; premarital sex and suicide in 'Cuckoo Corn'; horrible violence and death in 'Party Piece'; war and genocide in 'The Field Hospital' and 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' and dark and erotic desires in most poems. Furthermore, 'Hedgehog' also exemplifies a convoluted type of poetry that refuses to answer to aesthetic presuppositions and utilitarian demands of legitimisation by any community – not least those of the divided society of Northern Ireland at the time of its publication. The poem also tends to illustrate unanswerability to philosophical propositions and critical commentary, and a tendency to repudiate such external pressures by undermining its own poetic premises. At the very beginning of his career, Muldoon arrives at a metaphor of the poematic that anticipates how his autotelic ingenuity and many transfigurations of the poetic keep poetry – in its many tentative manifestations – restive and alive. In his oeuvre, as in *New Weather*, language *per se* ensures the survival of the poetic, frequently in new habitats and contexts.

The conclusion to 'Wind and Tree' captures this kind of self-destructive survival most cogently in its dramatic prophecy: 'Yet by my broken bones / I tell new weather' (3). Powerful in proverbial wisdom and literary allusiveness, the painful weather forecast announces, in colloquial terms, changes of private

and public character with political and aesthetic implications, and this volition for radical change is strongly articulated despite the unknowable outcome.[10] The anatomical symbolism in this poetic phrase for deconstructive methodology includes Kinsella's gapped tradition, disparate literary traditions, fractured communities and, most of all, a language that is split against itself. Where Kinsella is nostalgic for a lost tradition and constrained by his broken background, Muldoon is empowered: he assumes strength from fractured language traditions, cross-canonical sources and partitioned communities. Above all, he thrives on a language that reconstitutes itself from its many broken forms. With all its advertent interdependence, the organicist metaphor of 'Wind and Tree' illustrates the volatile circumstance surrounding family genealogy, organisational structures and social order. Consequently, the poem enacts the strife, feuds and disintegration that threaten to destroy and deracinate the supposedly natural order and rootedness of family life and social fabric. Its spiky vocabulary – 'arms,' 'fire,' 'branches,' 'madly,' 'broken bones' – strikes a raw nerve, far away from the organic allusiveness it folds in on, of the events of Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, the Shankill Butchers, state militarism, paramilitary violence and internal feuds in Northern Ireland at the time of its publication. The allusion to Sinn Fein ('Ourselves Alone') in 'about

10 'Wind and Tree' relates to a long line of nature poetry. The tradition in Irish poetry of representing the national and individual identity by natural fluctuations starts with the incantations in *The Book of Invasions* by Amergin, supposedly the first poet of Ireland. The Hag of Beare and the Crane Bag myth are other instances of the same convention. In its delineation of natural forces the poem echoes early Irish seasonal lyrics, for example the revelation of natural devastation and divine indifference in the repetitive exclamations of destruction and the conclusive simile of conflagrant annihilation in the anonymous eighth or ninth century rann 'The Storm.' By lexical contingencies, 'Wind and Tree' relates to many texts: the poem vibrates with the desolate winds and unappeasable ghost of Yeats's intense lyrics of broken love in *The Wind among the Reeds* and the forces of disintegration in Ted Hughes' 'Wind,' and connects with the more politicised context of Fenton's identically-titled poem. Clair Wills compares Muldoon's poem to the later strains of Romanticism and finds in Frost's poetry templates for Muldoon's 'oblique allusion,' and in Lawrence's early poem 'Discord in Childhood' 'a hidden narrative of parental strife and paternal violence.' *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 29. Critical tracing of Frost's poetry in Muldoon's would come as no surprise to the author himself. 'Frost has designs on it,' runs a very self-reflective line in 'Vespers' (NW, 18), a poem that considers literary bed fellows as much as personal ones. In his early admiration of Robert Frost, Muldoon follows the map set up by his educational mentor and literary guide at the time, Heaney. For Muldoon's engagement with Frost, see Muldoon, 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' 107–128; *The End of the Poem*, 53–82; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 134. See also Rachel Buxton, *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry: The American Connection* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

ourselves' in the second stanza, emphasises this immediacy. However, the volatile, self-destructive and regenerative natural forces of 'Wind and Tree' also play – certainly in the sense of syntactic tree – on the transformations of language by circumstance and contingency.

In the Irish tree-alphabet that Robert Graves explores in *The White Goddess*, every letter derives its name from the specific tree of which it is the initial. Thus, the arboreal imagery of 'Wind and Tree' confers innovation to the linguistic element, even the significance of the single letter, and connects the linguistic focus of Irish poetry with a tradition that is separate from the linguistic turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the poem connects exactly with the post-structuralist philosophy of its last decades. Destructive forces in the poem are not inherent to the trees themselves, or the wind, they erupt in their interlocked inescapability. There is no specific location or system for the breakage, the branches 'are grinding madly together and together' (3). How and whence the wind comes cannot be determined. A multifractured but indomitable subject with a radical agenda suddenly arises in a single sentence from the dyadic structures: 'Yet by my broken bones / I tell new weather' (3). Within a linguistic framework, the poem demonstrates how deconstruction views sign and reference, signifier and signified, as inseparable but not united, how meaning itself inheres in the play of difference, and how deconstruction punctures the ideas of totality, centre and origin. It also illustrates how deconstruction readmits the importance of the subject, regardless of how fractured s/he/it might be, but also, as the wind might indicate, of historical contingency and social conditioning – all the factors of language, life and human arts that the structuralist tendency excluded from its intellectual enterprise.

Vestigially present in the postulation of a different future, 'new weather,' is a call for writing degree zero.[11] Muldoon's exasperated exclamation prophesises a new individual idiom that will be formed from a deconstructive type of language more than a fractured identity and a fragmented body politic. One possible way of mending the brokenness is to knit the vernacular to experimental formalism, an artistic mode Muldoon indicates when introducing the poem on a BBC programme by linking the poem with 'a partially remembered Irish proverb': 'Two-thirds of sickness happens at night; two-thirds of wind where

11 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' Roland Barthes asks, and emphasises the importance of formal composition, the encyclopaedic word and a progressive poetic language in his corrective to Sartre's view of literature as a translucent medium of meaning and social commitment in *What is Literature?* Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Levers and Colin Smith (New York: Noonday Press, [1953] 1988), 41–52.

there are trees.'[12] It is tempting to add that whoever keeps well-grounded gets nowhere. The plays and ploys on weather lore and 'broken bones' are manifold and the popular phrase for forecasting the weather by corporeal and often painful changes in personal anatomy strives to liberate the poem from a stilted style, and to relocate the vitality of artistic verse in popular speech.[13] The eruptive force of the singular last line in 'Wind and Tree' shatters the poem's dual framework; the oppositional elements and the organised couplets. Likewise, the consonantal power of the voiced, bilabial plosives explodes the balanced tone and the sonorous assonance adds solemnity to the pathological image of fractured anatomy. Despite Muldoon's own repudiation of the moralistic tenor of the last lines of 'Wind and Tree' as 'thumping of the soap-box … silly and imperious,' the poem signals the event of his own language-focused and, intermittently, very deconstructive poetics.[14]

The many enfolded similes in the volume present most perspicaciously the linguistic tendency of the poematic and deconstruction, a poetic that turns in on itself for survival. 'We say, Hedgehog, come out / Of yourself and we will love you' (27). But the solipsistic hedgehog does not. Neither do many of the other creatures, people and phenomena in the volume. Drawing on Empson and comparing Andrew Marvell with Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon, Christopher Ricks proposes that internecine warfare – in Cromwell's England or Northern Ireland – engenders 'self-inwoven' similes as 'first, an intense self-reflexive concern with the art of poetry itself in poems; and second, a thrilled perturbation at philosophical problems of perception and imagination.[15] Self-inwoven similes inhabit *New Weather* and emphasise introversion, fear and anxiety. 'Seeing the birds in winter / Drinking the images of themselves / Reflected in a sheet of ice' (31), offers a cold image that devours its own disappearance in a freeze frame of an anaemic woman's hermeticism in 'Vampire.' The neurasthenic lady, who foreshadows the many independent and complex female characters in later volumes, appears as a troubled version of the inspirational muse, and a pained and dejected Mother Ireland in a poem

12 Muldoon quoted in Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 42. Montaigne gives Lucan's great epic of war, 'Pharsalia,' 'also known by the popular title of "The Civil War,"' as the source of the wind and tree proverb – a sinister frame to Muldoon's poem. Michel Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, [1580] 2004), 19.

13 For a collection of Irish weather lore, see Gabriel Rosenstock, *Irish Weather Wisdom* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 2000). Some of the associations with 'broken bones' include states of transition in Frank O'Connor's 'Bones of Contention,' David's Psalm 22, and the suffering of Christ's passion.

14 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 135.

15 Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 54–55.

that allegorises art's uncertain and auto-parasitic existence in sanguinary shadows and gothic terms of failed love, social ostracism and personal entrapment. Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* set a horizon of paranoia and persecution that closes in on the female character in 'Elizabeth': 'You hold yourself as your own captive' (33). This self-imposed solitude suggests artistic isolation, and highlights problems of preserving the poetic from the ekphrastic and the intertextual that add vitality to these verses. The schizophrenic self-imprisonment is also fraught with artistic ambivalence and the latency of a language that cannot escape its own parameters. This atmosphere of confinement and claustrophobia prevails in the book: people's lives are circumscribed by electric gardens (1), and the goldfish by its bowl (17); chickens are 'air trapped in the capsized / Boat where they coop' (20); a young maid has her life amputated by the procrustean restrictions of patriarchy (36); a young couple drown themselves due to stifling surroundings (38) and Indians are incarcerated (30) and annihilated (44–47). Embedded rhymes and images of entrapment further emphasise the inescapability of untimely enclosure in life and language. In the laying waste of 'Blowing Eggs,' for example, 'nest' is ominously emplaced alphabetically in 'intestine' (4) to prescribe the unfruitful discharge of the boy's semen and the egg's zygote. Other images intensify feelings of entrapment and constriction: 'ships in bottles, // The sea in shells' (20), 'like a sleeping anaconda' (38). How art presents itself in poetry at times of civil war, as Ricks discusses, is clearly a linguistic problem as much as a philosophical one, if these two dimensions can be separated at all in the intellectual activity of the previous century. *New Weather* shows an increasing linguistic self-awareness, which 'Hedgehog' illustrates most lucidly, not only of pressures upon art in poetry, but also of the incapacities and problems of the poetic itself.

The enfolded hedgehog signals how the poetry in the book turns in on its own tradition – whether linguistic, literary or Irish – for the sake of protection, preservation and procreation – the 'esoteric or pied' Muldoon considers cognate with 'the wonderbirth' of Irish poetry, 'such as results from the breaking down of a form of type,' in his own citation from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[16] *Dinnseanchas*, 'the lore of place,' is one of the esoteric and pied forms Muldoon engages with in *New Weather*. This basically pre-Christian form of mythological lore is an important element in the verbal and written fiction of Ireland. In these poetic accounts of Ireland, the amorous celebration of land and language, *dinnseanchas*, holds a central position.[17] These typonymic

16 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 5.

17 Seamus Deane points to land and language as important premises for Irish literature in the introduction to his *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber

poems of linguistic and topographical appropriation through etymology and emplacement reached a high point in the poetics of the 1970s.[18] 'Macha' and 'Clonfeacle' are two highly accomplished versions of such place-name poems. Yet, in Muldoon's catalogue of creative geo-temporal onomastics, they, in their rooted linguistics and traditional form, mainly provide counterpoints for his later imaginative play and experimental form with ideas of signification and typography, deracination and belonging. Such revitalisation of the tradition and form, into which the poems fold, is effected by the metaphoric denial of region and religion for adolescent foreplay in 'Clonfeacle,' a poem that also incorporates a formal eschewal of its own genre. 'I turn my back on the river / And Patrick, their sermons // Ending in the air' (14). In like manner, 'Lives of the Saints' (28) recasts the myth of St. Brendan's voyage in the razzmatazz of today's media circus, and proposes with psychedelic humour a dead ironic solution to the mystery of the saint's fate. By analogy with stoned skyscraper-jumpers, the solution is simply that his high-flown religious fanaticism precipitated his drowning: 'The boat was stone' (28). 'Reporters for the Chronicles' (28) portrays religious and historical scribes as purveyors of hype and the spin doctors of their time. A religious universe is jettisoned and the play on biblical books, historical records and daily news probes the purposes of a writer. This particular poem suggests that demystification and renovation of language is one of the several significant principles inherent in the reconstitution of poetic anatomy from 'broken bones' and in the clamant call for change in *New Weather*.

Seanchas, 'old lore,' is closely connected to *dinnseanchas*, the lore of place. Poems in *New Weather* draw upon but do not dwell in the language, lore and culture of a Celtic past that has so frequently inspired nostalgia, sentimentalism and retrospection. Instead, Muldoon dares to take tradition into the traffic of modern modes for the vitalisation of both the new and the old. 'Seanchas' (25), for example, facilitates these traversals. The title sets by linguistic sound

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and Faber, 1985), 11–16. *Dinnseanchas* stem from an old pre-literary tradition, but they are also known from the recensions of *Lebor na hUidre*, *Book of the Dun Cow*, transcribed about 1100; *Lebor Laignech*, *Book of Leinster*, which dates from about fifty years later; and *Táin Bo Cúailgnech*, *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, which was translated by Ciaran Carson in 2007 and Thomas Kinesella in 1969.

18 John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972) is a *locus classicus* for the resuscitation of the genre towards the end of the previous millennium. Heaney, who taps into this tradition in many of his poems in *Wintering Out* (1972), focuses on *dinnseanchas* as a point of departure for explorations of locality in Irish poetry in 'The Sense of Place' in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 131–150. Brian Friel dramatises the tradition in *Translations* (1980).

and alphabetic sight the scene for ancient Celtic culture and the Gaelic word for 'old lore,' storytelling – which also includes in its essential meaning traditional law and lore and ancient history as well as oral tradition, talk and chat – evokes a time when the poet held high public status and observed the tasks of legislation and civic duties in addition to his artistic craft – the type of historical public spokesman and official position captured so craftily by Yeats's play *The King's Threshold*. The idea in these three quatrains is of an oral lore on a wide variety of subjects passed on by narration, discussion and plain old story-telling. The verses convert congealed conventions into something more vibrant through idiomatic reformulation and generic traverse as the poem approaches, with critical reservations and echoes of Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*, the long-standing Irish tradition of storytelling. These verses subject to scrutiny the tradition of oral stories. A self-entwined simile – 'we were like that mountain whose base / We kept sidestepping,' – sets the stage for sightseeing, storytelling and involvement with tradition. In this poem, the act of telling reveals unacknowledged moral supremacy and ideological foreclosure as both the guide and the visitors are as rock sure as the mountain by which they are gathered: 'Thinking ourselves superior / Having, we thought, our final attitude and bias' (25). Accounts of local heroes and land disputes dispel any bemusement the silent encounter might produce. Acts of speech only perpetuate general opinion as the seanchas' spontaneous improvisations are only spurious, and ultimately restrained by the narrative patterns of apparently spontaneous delivery: 'He can adlib / No other route.' Against this unmediated continuation of thought through speech, Muldoon proffers alterity:

> The lifted wondering faces of his sheep
> Stare back at us like nimble rain clouds, their bellies
> Accumulate and are anonymous again. But having shape,
> Separate and memorable. (25)

The sudden juxtaposition of the inarticulate flock of sheep with the stories of the individual teller generates scathing ironies in its many paradoxical permutations. A population of sheep in the landscape, instead of the traditional heroes, provides a humorous diversion from a mythic past to a mundane present, which the shepherd tends to be out of touch with. In its animate, rootless and plural appearance, the beast functions as a critical reminder of a vital verbal tradition that risks desuetude because it has come to regard itself as a natural product that no longer observes its own artificial criteria and historical conditioning. As such, the poem enacts an uncritical continuation of tradition. That the sheep are more distinguished and memorable than the seanchai, parades

the insignificance of spinners of yarns, and undermines their status as spiritual leaders. In their redistribution of sheepishness, the final verses indicate the fatuity of any genre that does not revaluate continuously its own criteria and the flock mentality of epigones and uncritical audiences. Consequently, 'Seanchas' serves to remind its readers of the necessity for storytelling, or any other verbal or literary tradition, to reconsider incessantly its own characteristics and forms of presentation in a multimedia society. The poem revitalises by ridicule the storytelling tradition that has been a focal point of Irish life for more than a thousand years. The substitution in the poem of the geological metaphor of a mountain for the image of sheep might suggest a change in matter from the fixed and petrified to the agile and living, and, in form, from congealed phonocentric conventions of stories and songs to animated media. Such transformations in substance and style immediately place the seanchas tradition at peril of extinction. The risks are multiple and menacing, but a dismissal of the incumbent perils is not a viable artistic reaction. On the contrary, the crucial problematics of the specific and the generic can be conducive to creativity and survival, as indicated by the cinematopoeic correspondences in this volume, and the ekphrastic, deconstructive and multi-experimental techniques in volumes to come.

Thematic and narrational interlacing between 'Elizabeth,' 'The Field Hospital' and 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and The Ugly* and Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue*, respectively, engenders examination of singular qualities and general values. 'Seanchas' and *New Weather*'s cross-medial plurification of storytelling captures in the Irish mode of poetry the paradox of the poetic and the narrative that energises much of Muldoon's poetry. The moving of seanchas, storytelling, from inert unity and rootedness to animated plurality for the future, equivocates ideas of authenticity and original aura, and transforms traditional values of cultural heritage. Transitions of culture from past to present, and from one artistic medium to another, also suggest Muldoon's intrepid release of the poetic into the genres of drama, libretti, collaborations and, even, digitisation. The routs and routes of transformation and transdisciplinarity can both defeat and deliver the poetic. 'Seanchas,' thus, offers a seminal example of Muldoon's *narrathanotographic* poems in which an enigmatic exposition of old modes possibly instigates novel forms of narration and new concepts of self while at the same time running the risk of extinguishing traditions.

Of all imaginings of language in the volume, 'The Radio Horse' (21) suggests an almost endless enigma. As a balky beast of a poem, the poem has thrown all critics. Kendall attempts to lead it back to the stable of love poetry in the one-liner: 'In "The Radio Horse" the approaching woman is described in hostile

terms as "another spy / Infiltrating my lines.'"[19] Of course the poem dallies with erotics; which horse poem, particularly Muldonic ones, does not? Somewhat more enlightening but equally brief, Jefferson Holdridge tries to rein it in by labelling it a riddle poem, 'in which intimate experience provides our best cures and codes.'[20] Clair Wills shies away from it all together, as do all other commentators. Admittedly, the hermeneutic hurdles are steep and numerous, but shifted into a linguistic arena, some bets can be placed. 'The Radio Horse' corresponds to 'The Hedgehog' and 'The Electric Orchard,' but its cryptogeneric obscurities and techno-natural oscillations appear less congenial to metaphoric or parabolic solutions. In Muldoon's incessant search for new figures, radio horse, whatever it is, enters with unpredictable jolts to recall falls of various kinds and to problematise easy recourse to communication, as the different wavelengths are already infiltrated by Trojan horses and 'lost in codes.' The poem springs from the importance of horses in Irish history and culture, plays on numerous proverbial horses, connects with a long tradition of horse imagery in modern literature from Lawrence and Yeats to Larkin, Hughes and Longley, relates to the preceding 'Dancers at the Moy,' (11) and introduces Muldoon's catalogue of horse imagery that runs all the way up to *Horse Latitudes* and beyond. The first four lines enter into a dialogue with Heaney's anti-prairiean credo in 'Bogland':

> I believed in those plains
> Without grass or sky,
> A levelled silence
> Broken only by the credible woods.
> Then the first thud
> Of a horse by radio, (21)

The bio-mechanical compound of these lines serves to differentiate them from much of the literary tradition by means of undecidable variety. The radio horse, in the sense of the timber-harvesting winch designed to maximise productivity and minimise the cost of modernised forestry, appears as an original and complex metaphor for writing.[21] In an Irish landscape the American machine signals an industrialised deforestation that has already taken place,

19 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 33.
20 Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon*, 20.
21 For a visualisation and a glimpse into the technicalities of the radio horse, see Chris B. LeDoux, Bruce W. Kling, and Patrice A. Harou, 'Predicting Bunching Costs for the Radio Horse 9 Winch,' ed. United States Department of Agriculture (1987).

and the mechanical machine certainly gives an ironic twist to 'Wind and Tree' and Graves' alphabetic mythology in 'The Battle of the Trees'[22] There is a similar ironic turn in the fact that the tractor-mounted equipment has replaced traditional horse logging. As a metaphor for authorial management of textual timber and literary cultivation, the mechanical device indicates new poetic processes and economies, and announces an alternative mode of ITO – International Trade Organisation – to organicist poetics. The sylvi-cultural thinning of crop trees suggests textual pruning, commercial redaction and anthological preservation. As an instrument that facilitates the efficient handling of literary logs, it also contains the power to eradicate totally its own field of fertile production. Hedgehogs stand little chance.

Perhaps 'a horse by radio' connects with 'disc jockey' or recalls the visionary ideas – jukeboxes, tape recorders and television among them – of one of the inventors and fathers of science fiction, Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967). Gernsback founded the radio station WRNY and contracted eighty patents and his Gernsback Publications became a force behind such future fiction magazines as *Amazing Stories*, *Radio Craft* and *Sexology* that ran under a variety of names from 1926 to the publisher's death in 1967. His annual 'Christmas Card' forecast was his dream of the future and the insights into science and technology that were canvassed amazed many a scientist.[23] One of his technological visions was remote electronic jockeying, a technical invention he also regarded as a potential future liberation of the beast of burden from human oppression. The idea of controlling a horse via remote control exemplifies a scientific desire to control natural forces, and could parallel the wish to control by technical ingenuity – linguistic, poetic, formal and artistic – the movement of an external body from a removed location. In this respect, poetic activity has similarities with radio horse-racing commentators who have to produce a time-locked and accurate monologue in response to rapidly changing events.

Industrial noise and technological reference in the poem do not overpower other notions. 'The Radio Horse' becomes symbolic of the phonetic importance of poetic transmission, and plays ambiguously on military surveillance, transsexual codes and textual relations. The horses carry 'Not only the plans / Of that one's plot or counterplot / But your realer secrets.' The 'levelled silence' of the landscape's vista is broken not only by the trees but also by the radio wavelengths 'infiltrating my lines.' Unheard by everyone without a receiver

22 Robert Graves, ed. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, [1948] 1962), 27–48.

23 AA, 'Hugo Gernsback's Forecast Science Fiction E-Zine,' https://www.magazineart.org/publishers/gernsback.html, accessed 15 May 2018.

tuned to the right frequency, the air is nevertheless charged with messages. This air of intertextual anxiety, which also vibrates with paramilitary missives and state surveillance, narrows down to personal relationships as the many sexual connotations of riding align with cross-dressing to suggest the personal drives of literary creation and the multiple gratifications of text.

> I believed in your riding all night
> Lathered by your own sweat,
> Your dressing as boys
>
> Keeping in their shirts or jeans
> Messages for my eyes only,
> Whose latest are canc-
> Elled to a word, that lost in codes,
> Telling of their being delayed
> By horses' thrown shoes. (21–22)

The ruptured enjambment of 'canc-elled' breaks standard lines of poetic formation, embodies the dissolution of metaphorical consistency, and visualises the overstepping of conventional morals. 'Thrown shoes' emphasises the many associations of undressing, and the energies – natural, artistic or lustful – which will not be tamed. In its many shifting codes and associations, 'The Radio Horse' is not an easy one to decipher. The poem evinces Muldoon's inventive vigour, and initiates this particular animal's status as an overriding image in his succeeding oeuvre. More than anything, the poem transmits the recalcitrance of Muldoon's poetic language, and how such indecipherability resists while also prompting interpretation. 'The Radio Horse' is intimately related to 'The Hedgehog.' They both suggest a Muldonic and beastly language of force and restiveness.

That the poems in *New Weather* are beset with language issues becomes clear in other ways too. In the phantasmagoric inferno of the very first poem, 'The Electric Orchard,' the population suffers from loss of articulation: 'None could describe / Electrocution, falling, the age of innocence' (2). Atrocity, bliss and *felix culpa* escape expression, but the entire poem's sense of homogeneity also makes language impossible, since language is dependent upon difference and otherness. This high voltage version of Edenic fall – the poem moves with *versus longus*, and the hexametric first line replays the favourite metre of the classical pastoral – prolongs the pastoral tradition by folding in on it: Biblical, Virgilian, Marvellian and countless other allusions are revivified by this bipolar charge. These ideas of falling and telling are essential to the oneiric garden and

hardly any of the poems in the volume fail to allude to problematic falls from innocence, abstraction and reticence into culpability, concreteness and language. As an inversion of the inveterate myths of Blarney, kiss of the stone and gift of the gab, the poem is interesting enough; as a nightmarish report on silence and schismogenesis in the North, it assumes haunting qualities. If people subsist in muteness, the natural world is more vocal: a clutch of ducklings 'had learned to speak our tongue' in 'The Lost Tribe' (39) and 'the river would preach as well as Patrick did' in 'Clonfeacle' (14). Inversions of the natural order of speech reveal an artistic curiosity that refutes the ordinary parameters of language, and seeks to test and understand its rationale, or lack thereof, in new territory. A continuous renovation of clichés – 'stolen his thunder' (1); 'pulling itself together' (4); 'wearing her heart on her sleeve' (15); 'change of heart' (17); 'have the last laugh' (28); 'lose her head' (36); 'taking, giving back their lives' (41) – teases out new life, often with startling violence, of dead language, and exudes metalinguistic awareness. A corresponding alphabetic awareness appears in 'The Kissing Seat,' which rolls its union of love, division and diametrically different outlooks into a single letter: 'We're caught and fixed // In its ornamental S' (34). In 'Thrush' the letter P is pregnant with personality. Initial proverbial wisdom prescribes the tragic end of the lovers in 'Cuckoo Corn.' Typical watermarks of Muldoon's poetic language appear continuousy: slanted rhymes, surgical enjambments and syntactic and stanzaic variety. 'Grass Widow' presents the first one-sentence poem, and 'Kate Whiskey' the first sonnet in Muldoon's poetry. The Waking Father' presents the first instance of what Jonathan Allison labels 'Muldoonian might': the possibility, uncertainty and conditionality of Muldoon's special use of modal auxiliaries.[24] An accumulation, like this, of linguistic dissimilarities reveals a type of poetic that, like a hedgehog, turns unceasingly in on its own language; into its modes and tones, into its syntax and single letters, to solicit the folds of silence and articulation, always with heuristic metalinguistic acumen.

'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi,' the conclusive crescendo of the collection, also demonstrates an astute awareness of how language operates in its immediate contexts. The self-righteous social schismogenesis of 'The Electric Orchard' and the internecine violence in 'Wind and Tree' resurface together in these concluding lines. This inscription of individual suffering, endangered species and endemic enmity unfold in images that cut into themselves, and in verses that threaten their own textual genealogy. By combining individual tragedy and genocide the narrative poem explodes the volume's civilisatory

24 Jonathan Allison, '"Everything Provisional." Fictive Possibility and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson,' *Etudes-Irlandaises* 20, no. 2 (1995).

tension and menace of death in its incantatory commemoration of Ishi, the last survivor of the Californian Yahi tribe that was exterminated at the beginning of the twentieth century. Subject matter and stylistic manner coalesce as the poem concludes along intratextual and tribal lines. A twelve-stanza cycle accounts for the infinite fate of an indigenous people and the intermittent finitude of Muldoon's artistic outset. At the very start, the cycle recapitulates the preceding poetic concerns and narrative events:

> In the Moon
> Of Frost in the Tepees,
> There were two stars
> That got free.
> They yawned and stretched
> To white hides,
> One cutting a slit
> In the wall of itself
> And stepping out into the night. (44)

The lyrical phrase for a winter month, 'moon of frost,' eclipses the normal English vocabulary of the calendar, and imbues the line with Amerindian sonority and the whole volume's inclement temperature. Frost, as in inclement weather but also the Frost of 'The Vanishing Red,' looms like an icicle over the verses, which are also imbued with the climate of Heaney's *Wintering Out*. Two supernovas transform to skins in a descent from metaphysical and universal enlightenment to corporeal embodiment and a temporal condition that anticipates subsequent xenophobia and slaughter. Furthermore, a remarkable self-celestial simile delineates a centripetal transition of the star back into a nocturnal dimension. Evident metaphors for the two Indian survivors, the lone stars are engulfed by tropes of light and darkness; they are extinguished at the dawn of colonial conquest:

> In the Moon
> Of the Leaves Falling,
> I had just taken a bite out of the
> Moon and pushed the plate
> Of the world away.
> Someone was asking for six troopers
> Who had lain down
> One after another
> To drink a shrieking river.

In the Moon
Of the Trees Popping, two snails
Glittered over a dead Indian.
I realized that if his brothers
Could be persuaded to lie still,
One beside the other
Right across the Great Plains,
Then perhaps something of this original
Beauty would be retained. (47)

The sudden incursion in the penultimate stanza of an alien persona into the omniscient point of view – a rapture recalling the final line of 'New Weather' – enacts on a formal level the rapacious invasion of land and taking of life in the new world. Greed knows no limit as the invader devours time and celestial bodies in his impatient denial of the actual world, in which beauty is only achieved by total conquest and utmost subjection of terra incognita. On the brink of tribal extirpation Ishi's single combat against the intruding army marks a moment of survival and death. His enactment of cultural tradition and individual integrity endows extinction with a paradoxical indomitability. Conversely, survival by surrender ensures the demise of both tradition and individual integrity. The violent destruction of the love seasons of an Indian couple by colonial brutality, which marks the annihilation of an entire population, is suffused with historical horror. In view of the volume's thematic concerns and the socio-political contexts of Northern Ireland in 1973 the poem catches the concurrent warfare and its ideological arsenal in a poetic language somewhat distant from the directness of the political demagoguery, journalistic immediacy and the intellectual discourses of its milieu. 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' was written as a direct response to Bloody Sunday in Derry on 30 January 1972, a fact that 'may not be immediately apparent to many readers,' Muldoon states.[25] The poem manages remarkably well to refract as well as to make allusion to that tragedy, to dwell upon as much as to draw away from it, and Muldoon's choice of poetic language clearly threatens to obliterate the event it intends to commemorate. Within the congeries of disputed discourses surrounding Bloody Sunday the analogy instantly endorses the Republican view

25 Muldoon, 'Notes for "Chez Moy: A Critical Autobiography"' (unpublished manuscript, 1994). Quoted in Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 38; Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 41. For poetic presentations of Bloody Sunday, and their relations to the many discourses, court cases and inquiries into the tragedy, see Moi, '"In a Ghostly Pool of Blood / a Crumpled Phantom Hugged the Mud": Spectropoetic Presentations of Bloody Sunday and the Crisis of Northern Ireland,' 61–82.

of the situation as a colonial crisis caused by British imperialism. In this respect the poem represents the British as the archetypal violent aggressor and the Irish as the quintessential victims of jingoistic supremacism, a clear-cut conflict that no doubt enflames the one party as much as it infuriates the other. This contextual, and somewhat direct and reductive, reading ignores in its intellectual complacency the oblique distantiation of the text. Its lyric refinement precludes the heat and the hatred of many other literary responses to the event, not least Thomas Kinsella's *Butcher's Dozen*. Its displacement of colonial conflict to another time and a different continent resists the temporal and spatial immediacy that tended to constrict other contemporary perspectives. Furthermore, this poetic account, which corroborates the standard story of expulsion of Irish people by British imperialism, extends to an implicit questioning of participation by Irish immigrants in the colonial conquest of America, an obvious impertinence to the prevailing moral alibi of early-seventies nationalism. These evocations of Amerindian persecution challenge the unchecked perpetuation of nationalist grievances almost thirty years before Liam Kennedy's revisionist acronym, MOPE – the most oppressed people ever – had become an acceptable term even in Republican strongholds.[26] Muldoon's *narrathanotography*, 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi,' commemorates the horrible tragedy of Bloody Sunday in a distinctively poetic language that questions the moral bias of both sides of conflicts in American history, in Northern Ireland at the time of its publication, and in future tragic clashes to come.

'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' compresses the volume's strategies. Its deferment in language, time and space sees the structured polarities of the language and thinking of its day refracted in original ways, questioning the centrality and origin of the violence of Bloody Sunday by tracing the reasons for this tragedy to other places, other periods and other constellations of conflict. This oblique angle of approach tends 'to look slightly farther back at the society from which the situation erupted, at *why* we are how we are now.'[27] Nuanced poetic creativity constitutes a critique of political rhetoric and ideological formations in process at the time: this poematic bristles with spikes against the ordinary traffic of poetry and politics by representing its own precariousness. These techniques and the subversive stance they articulate, which will evolve throughout Muldoon's poetry, are particular to his first volume. This Amerindian strategy, for example, expands most notably in *Meeting the British* and

26 Liam Kennedy coined his revisionist catch-phrase for the politicised self-piteous element in Irish historiography in his *Colonialism, Religion, and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996), 217.

27 Muldoon in interview with Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 136–137.

Madoc, but the nascent ability to engage at an angle with the chosen matter, in Ireland or elsewhere, assumes continuously new templates and techniques, for example the Judeo-Arabic constellations in *Moy Sand and Gravel*. In the self-mutilating similes and in the incantatory rhythms of Amerindian death and survival these lines iterate the tragedy of Bloody Sunday, while they at the same time refract standard conceptualisations of this tragedy through another lens. 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi,' in its narrathanographic quality, renders not only the annihilation of a people that has already taken place, but also the menacing miasma of trauma and rhetoric in Northern Ireland and other places at the time of its publication in 1973.

Challenged by events that outstripped the prevailing poetic mode at the time, and perhaps also defied articulation altogether, *New Weather* proclaims a shift in poetic language as much as anything else. Craftily symbolised by the hedgehog, Muldoon turns language itself into a site of involuted contestation. This hedgehog does more than mess around with the roots of New Criticism: in its blind, nervous and dangerous solipsism, the hedgehog typifies a stylistically self-absorbed poetic language that risks sealing itself off from the world, and risks ebbing away due to lack of relevance. Yet this volume shows that a secretive type of poetry, which is as sensitive as it is spiky, can survive in the traffic of aesthetic demands, political pressures and public opinion. An awareness of the operations of language as not always identical to itself, of the discourses into which new statements – poetic or otherwise – enter, and of the many contexts they negotiate, provides *New Weather* with poetic power to address and move beyond the prevailing sentiments of its day, and to survive for a long time after its conception.

CHAPTER 2

Mules

If 'the whole poem is more likely to be metaphor than to contain metaphors,' as Peter Scupham claims of Muldoon's poems, than 'Mules' holds its own with restive figures in his entire second volume from 1977, *Mules*, just as 'Hedgehog' persists as one of the immalleable metaphors from his first volume *New Weather*.[1] *Mules* can be understood as a meditation upon the fusions of poetic language and its many realities, and as a questioning of the outcome of the artistic process and the resultant artefact, whereas *New Weather* can be read as a metaphoric and metamorphic investigation of poetic language and all its caprice and contexts. The first volume offers harsh conditions, demise, survival, happenstance and serendipity; the second evokes sterility and stagnation of a fated and pessimistic quality. Where a nocturnal and vulnerable but vital animal, the hedgehog, signifies risk of extinction in the debut volume, the cross-bred offspring of jackass and mare with no powers of procreation embodies moribundity in *Mules*. If many of the poems in *New Weather* depolarise divisions – linguistic, discursive, cognitive, poetic and political – the verses in *Mules* are bent on imagining and charting any possible space between binary constrictions.

As a poetic figure these beasts become emblematic of Derrida's *hymen*, the postmodernist paradigm of liminality that Edward Larrissy discusses so cogently in Muldoon's poetry, but *Mules*, as the alliterative overlapping with Muldoon makes clear, also presents itself as an obvious *sub*jective correlative, an idiosyncratic configuration of prosody and semantic uncertainty in which paronomastic mayhem and language estrangement integrate autobiographical aspects and immediate contexts to offer wide interpretative possibilities.[2] Likewise, 'Armageddon, Armageddon' implies similar paronomastic confusion by implicating Armagh, the troubled home region of the poet, in the title and lines of this closing apocalyptic vision. Clearly, the strong sense of stasis and termination embodied in the title image stems from the intensifying conflict in Northern Ireland, from the disintegration of Muldoon's first marriage to Anne-Marie Conway, and from the death of his mother of cancer.[3] Yet it also reflects

1 Peter Scupham, 'Learning from the Landscape,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 July 1977, 80.

2 Edward Larrissy, 'Muldoon's Betweenness,' *English* 54, no. 209 (2005), 117–133.

3 Published in 1977, the volume responds to the inferno of appalling violence and social disintegration in Northern Ireland. The preceding five years saw the highest death tolls, the upheavals of the Ulster Workers' Council Strike and the terrors of state militarism, paramilitary murder campaigns and indiscriminate tit-for-tat sectarian killings. See Paul Bew and

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a crisis in Muldoon's poetic language. The ingravescence from the possibility of death and extinction in most of *New Weather* to the actuality in *Mules* exudes a pessimism that reflects upon the conditions of Muldoon's poetry at the time, not least the functions and effects of his poetic language. In the manner that *New Weather* introduces Muldoon's energetic and enigmatic engagements with language and his negotiations with the many claims upon poetic language, *Mules* continues his obduracy in respect of standard figures of poetry and the familiar dictates of the political, but the point of this recalcitrance now appears darkened and dispirited. The doomed situation of the mules suggests a realisation of and, possibly, a resignation to the possibility that poetic language ultimately might prove incapable of coping with the terror of civil conflict, and the horror of personal loss and bereavement. It is as if the unassailable belief and hope in linguistic solutions and dissolutions in *New Weather* now, in the title of *Mules* and the image of the two superimposed mules on the cover of the Faber edition, approach a point of doubt and despair – possibly some sort of Wittgensteinian silence. 'They end as we end – / Dead in their beds, going round the bend, // In mid-sentence at keys' (45), states the persona in 'Cider' on the ambivalent impasses of roads, life, alcohol and language. This narrathanographic sonnet balances on the brink of demise and departure, a mood that pervades *Mules*. Its sense of abrupt termination before the sea of silence tends to be more an annulment of ideas of transcendence and posterity, as most of the poems in the book gather great vitality and articulation from acts of splicing and interbreeding. How can the art of poetry renew itself and its relevance in a world of brutal violence and implacable hatred? What meaning can it bring to the disintegration of love and the losses wrought by terminal disease and sudden death? How can the language of poetry, like hedgehogs and mules, plod on through chaos, confusion and morbidity?

Inquiries into language and literature predominate in *Mules*, from the questions of public rhetoric and metatextual debate of the initial poem, 'Lunch with Pancho Villa,' to the apocalyptic debacle of social order and personal relationship in the final 'Armageddon, Armageddon.' The first addresses ambiguously the crux of poetic commitment in a time of civic disturbance, whereas

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Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968–1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993); David McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. 2nd Revised Edition (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2004); Robert Kee, *Ireland. A History* (London: Abacus, 1997); Martin Dillon, *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study of Mass Murder* (London: Arrow, 1989). For biographical information, see Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 7–24; Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 16–18; Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon*, 1–9.

the last, much in response to the initial poem, integrates the personal and the cosmic with the public. Meditations in time of civil war carry over, of course, from Yeats's oeuvre, from the preoccupations of Heaney and many other poets at the time, and from the previous volume, *New Weather*.[4] In a geo-temporal displacement familiar from 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' (*NW*, 44–47), the opening poem sets the stage for these recurrent problems in revolutionary Mexico – a Catholic nation with a war-ridden history and a problematic proximity to an imperial power in the second decade of the twentieth century. Formal specificities sustain the geo-temporal correlations of Mexican-Irish revolutions. On a structural level the two sections reconfigure the divisions of

4 In the wake of the shock of the Easter rebellion Yeats ruminates most profoundly on the theme of art and war in *The Tower* (1929), but 'The Man and the Echo' in *Last Poems* (1939) recounts how the dilemma of political engagement and aesthetic concerns haunted him at the end of his career. Such concerns were inescapable to most poets in Northern Ireland during the recent conflict. 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?' Heaney asks famously in, *Preoccupations*, 13. The Catch 22 of aesthetics and ethics configures the cornerstones of his essay collections: *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) and *Crediting Poetry* (1995). Most poets grapple with the same dilemma, see for example Eavan Boland, 'Creativity,' *The Irish Times*, 13 August 1970, 14; Michael Longley, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), 9. Derek Mahon and Muldoon also discuss the predicament in interviews: Eamonn Grennan, 'The Art of Poetry,' *The Paris Review* 42, no. 154 (2000), 150–178; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 136–137. Frank Ormsby tends to capture accurately the entrapment of the artists throughout the Troubles: 'It is arguable that *any* poem by a Northern Irish poet since 1968, on whatever subject, could be termed a Troubles poem, in that it may, consciously or unconsciously, reflect the context in which it was written.' *A Rage for Order: Potery of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), xviii. For a selection of volumes upon which the Troubles impinge, see John Montague, *The Rough Field* (1972); Padraic Fiacc, *The Wearing of the Black* (1974); Seamus Heaney, *North* (1975); Michael Longley, *An Exploded View* (1973); Paul Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, (1987) and most volumes by Ciaran Carson, particularly *The Irish for No*, (1987) and *Belfast Confetti*, (1989). The hermeneutics of violence predicate much of the critical discourse, see for example 'The Poetry of War' and 'Poetry and Politics: 1970s & 1980s,' Part 2 and 7 in Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lisa Fitzpatrick, *Performing Violence in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010); Danine Farquharson and Sean Farrell, eds., *'Shadows of the Gunmen': Violence and Culture in Northern Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008); Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe books, 1986); *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994); Clair Wills, *Improprieties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Denis Donoghue, 'The Literature of Trouble,' in *We Irish* (California: University of California Press, 1986), 182–197; Peter McDonald, 'Poetry, Narrative, and Violence,' in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (2000), 41–81; Dillon Johnston, 'Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113–133.

interests on two separate continents, present binary conflict, and capture the second coming of the historical conflict in Northern Ireland. Probably written in 1976, the six ten-line stanzas mark the time span since 1916. If one chooses to date, as many do, the breakout of the of the conflict in Northern Ireland to the Civil Rights marches in 1968, the thirty lines of the second section prophetically account for the years leading up to the Easter Agreement in 1998. In their numerological precision and thematic concerns these lines recount the cultural nationalism of Yeats's commemorative 'Easter 1916,' but in their displaced setting, uneasy ironies and metapoetic considerations Muldoon's poem unsettles much of the political opinion and cultural sentiment of the 1970s – a mood to which Yeats contributed, but in ways that critics have been unable to agree on.[5]

Illiterate, and with an equivocal reputation as bandit and murderer, Pancho Villa's position as the leader of the north in the revolution against starvation and oppression meant that he was soon caught up in local feuds. In Muldoon's poem, however, the rebel leader figures as a literary superior; 'co-author of such volumes as *Blood on the Rose*, *The Dream and the Drums*, and *How It Happened Here*' (11), and a critical mentor to the junior poet who relates the story. Deceptively real, these titles recount with vision and *éclat* the Romantic imagery of sufferance and martyrdom, ideological militarism and historical justification. This combination of revolution, poetry and literary criticism references by implication such historical revolutionaries as Trotsky and Mao as touchstones, but the bloody rose symbolism points to the poetic nationalism of 'Roisin Dubh,' Yeats's rose poems and, most pertinently, the sacrificial and sanguinary symbolism of the rebel poets, primarily Pearse and Plunkett.[6] In an atmosphere of armchair radicalism Pancho Villa advices his attendant poet:

5 Infamously, Conor Cruise O'Brien blames Yeats for the IRA bloodshed in Northern Ireland in 'Politics and the Poet,' *The Irish Times*, 21 August 1975, 11–12. Seamus Deane points to the 'pathology of Irish unionism in Yeats' and states: 'Yeats provided Irish writing with a programme for action. But whatever its connection with Irish nationalism, it was not, finally, a programme of separation from the English tradition.' Seamus Deane et al., *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 49. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said lend support to Deane's claim in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). 'The man to beat is Yeats,' Dennis Donoghue retorts in respect of the political debates surrounding Yeats's poetry. Deane et al., *Ireland's Field Day*, 120.

6 For Pearse's poetry and the rhetoric of sacrifice and martyrdom, see his poems and Eugene McCabe's introduction in Dermot Bolger, ed. *The Selected Poems of Padraic Pearse* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993). See also Joseph Mary Plunkett, *The Poems of Joseph Mary Plunkett* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1916).

> Look, son. Just look around you.
> People are getting themselves killed
> Left, right and centre
> While you do what? Write rondeaux?
> There's more to living in this country
> Than stars and horses, pigs and trees,
> Not that you'd guess it from your poems.
> Do you ever listen to the news?
> You want to get down to something true,
> Something a little nearer home. (11)

Colloquial tone and a sense of patronage emphasise familial relations between the two comrades in poetry who contemplate their artistic vocation, a plausible enactment of colloquies of poets, for example those of the Belfast Group – tutorials between the undergraduate Muldoon and his tutor Heaney at Queen's University Belfast or gatherings with other established and aspiring poets in Belfast in the violent late sixties and early seventies, for example, those attended by Michael Longley, Frank Ormsby, Ciaran Carson and Medbh McGuckian.[7] On this view, the poem also functions as a subjective correlative. In ventriloquial terms the poem presents the persona as both advisee and advisor – 'What should I tell this callow youth / Who learned to write last winter' (13) – and thus evokes Muldoon's own doubts about doctrinal demands and aesthetic absolutes. Pancho Villa has no time for such personal compunctions; he avers sternly that closed forms of poetry cannot give an account of the dismal situation of geopolitical murders. Rondeaux – stanzaic manifestations of formal circumlocutions – epitomise artificiality and the poet's narcissistic concern for melody, metrics and prosodic intricacies. Themes and tropes of universal and natural character have to be relinquished for the demands of the immediate agenda and the pressures from several institutions. Amicable and admonishing, the verses re-enact the dual drives of political alliance and artistic detachment, almost a poetic condensation of the debate between Jean Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes, and also contrast rural setting against a more turbulent urban situation – both with multiple twists and ironies.[8] Where

7 See Brian Croxall and Rebecca Sutton Koeser, 'What Do We Mean When We Say "Belfast Group?"' Belfast Group Poetry, http://belfastgroup.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/essays/; Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); 'The Belfast Group: A Symposium,' *The Honest Ulsterman*, no. 53 (1976).

8 Sartre argues for social responsibility and thematic importance in *What is Literature* and Barthes emphasises language, form and textuality in his ripostes *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Pleasure of the Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1973] 1990).

home might be depends on complex individual lives; that 'news' is truer than natural phenomena borders on a lie: 'stars and horses, pigs and trees' are as close or distant to homes in Northern Mexico as they are in Northern Ireland. 'Lunch with Pancho Villa,' one of Muldoon's many subjective correlatives, ventriloquises the trespassing of the actual upon the artificial in general, and satirises the public demand for accessible verses and local authenticity. With irony, the poem fictionalises the claims made upon poetry by a guerrilla leader, complaints and caveats not unrelated to Muldoon's poetry itself.[9]

Pancho Villa's claims upon poetry – 'There's more to living in this country / Than stars and horses, pigs and trees' – are not inane or without precedent; they have a long history in Irish and classical literature.[10] However, as perennial elements in literature of natural symbolism, 'stars and horses, pigs and trees' may not be opposed to the human misery of violence and wars. The combination of rural creatures and vegetation with celestial lights glances tangentially against O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and this allusion perhaps obliquely invokes O'Casey's recriminatory prioritising of labour class issues over Irish nationalism and violence and the glorification of revolution. If this allusion is too far-fetched, only a misty-eyed and insensitive reader, perhaps an ideological writer personified by Pancho Villa in the poem, would overlook the linguistic counterpointing of words with private resonance against language of

9 '"Lunch with Pancho Villa" is a poem in which the old pamphleteer is upbraiding the protagonist in the kind of way that I might be upbraided,' Muldoon states in his interview with Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 138. Heaney upbraids Muldoon as the distant master of evasive involvement – a poker-faced player of orange and green cards in 'The Prenatal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry,' 36–53. William Scammel also thinks Muldoon is too elusive in 'Mid-Air Street? Review of *Meeting the British* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Irish Review* 3 (1988), 144–146.

10 A striking example of this discussion is to be found in Daniel Corkery's *Hidden Ireland*. In his delineation of the decline of the Gaelic poets of Munster, almost a pre-Foucauldian corrective to the historian Lecky's *The History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, Corkery clearly outlines some of the problems with the use of metaphors of stars in literature. In a discussion on stars and the poets of the dispossessed, such as Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súlleabháin, Corkery writes: 'They were all oppressed by great trouble of mind and heart. To quote Montaigne: "Anaximenes, writing to Pythagoras saith: 'With what sense can I amuse myself in the secret of the stars, having continually death or bondage before my eyes?'" For at that time, explains the essayist, "the kings of Persia were making preparations to war against his country." In the case of our poets, the Persian was no longer at the gate; he had broken in, conquered, and was now dividing the spoils. It was, indeed, no time for contemplating the stars. The charms of natural things, so intimately a part of the consciousness of the ancient Gaelic singers, were hidden from them as in a mist of sorrow.' *Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, [1924] 1967), 183.

public warfare. Obviously, 'stars' is also significant in the senses of personal fortune, individual talent, self-fashioning, military rank, prison status, and the staging of reality and fantasy. 'Pigs,' on the other hand, exists as the derogatory term for policemen, all types of human beasts, and the armoured vehicles most used in Belfast during the Troubles. 'Trees' evokes 'Wind and Tree' in the previous volume, indicates rootedness and family diagram, and well-branched organisations. Today 'horses' recalls leisure activity and riot cavalry more than Romantic cavaliers or revolutionary riders. 'Horse' is also slang for heroin and indicates the narcotic underbelly of border transactions, guerrilla warfare and internal community policing during the Troubles. 'Horse' also invites a wide-ranging play on proverbs, of which a few will serve to illustrate some of the techniques and tendencies in this volume. 'To horse' indicates animal husbandry, sexual philandering and exaggerated expenditure in this volume that combines rural life with erotic explicitness and deflations of poetic economy. 'To look a gift horse in the mouth' presents in proverbial currency an affirmative sublation of contradictions – the gift, the gifted and the given – in verses in which a prodigious new poet traverses the legacies of literature and history within contemporary conditions and negotiates this terrain with linguistic novelty. Such writing includes the disclosure of affected airs, pretence and arrogance – an intentional prance that clearly also amounts to riding the high horse. Numerous other Trojan horses of poetic dressage and horseplay occur in the course of the volume. Basically, the poems in the volume explore this entire semantic gamut in their infringements of precepts of idiomatic propriety and symbolic appositeness, and in their confounding of linguistic expectations. 'Pigs and trees, stars and horses' come to signify a use of vocabulary that does not rest upon its preliminary meanings, and a poetic language that can be as forceful as it can be restive.

That the meditations in 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' dwell upon the subliminal space between language and meaning becomes even clearer when philosophical questions clash with the linguistic fabric of the poem:

> But where (I wonder myself) do I stand,
> In relation to a table and chair,
> The quince-tree I forgot to mention,
> That suburban street, the door, the yard –
> All made up as I went along
> As things that people live among. (12)

The detailed delineation of domestic interior and immediate neighbourhood, which seems to be a subterfuge by the acolyte to the imperatives of his senior

'to get down to something true, / Something a little nearer home,' actually vindicates the linguistically invented over the physically given. Just as the prosaic matters of street, door and yard deflate the imaginative and the utopian, the invented status of these ordinary objects – 'all made up as I went along' – annuls the constructed opposition of the real and the imaginary. These lines highlight poetic deceit and the text's own constructedness, and suggest that Muldoon's poetry excels at linguistic artifice, as much as explorations of the interstices between the imaginative and the real, the poetic and the political, the solipsistic and the social, the private and the public, the urban and the rural.

In considerations of Irish literature pertinent to the setting and theme of 'Lunch with Pancho Villa,' Seamus Deane assesses Irish culture as 'neither wholly national nor colonial but a hybrid of both,' and dwells upon language, landscape and history as the contested sites of this culture in his introduction to *Celtic Revivals*.[11] He sees these fields of dispute as originating in the history of European Romanticism and its congenital emphasis on 'local attachment.'[12] In 'Pancho Villa,' Muldoon relocates this Romantic agon via a premeditated distancing enacted through verbal play and historical setting. Although the main issues remain somewhat the same, the Anglo-Irish axis is subjected to other crosswinds. Metatextual considerations and complex adlinguisticity complicate Romantic idealism, and supplement linguistic directness and local attachment with the Spanish-American language differences in the borderlands of Mexico and America at the beginning of the twentieth century. These geo-temporal substitutions reflect upon the conditions of Northern Ireland at the time of the poem's publication, and perhaps these introductions of co-existent cultures and local attachment in other places at other times also adopt the Chicano communities of the 1970s USA as counterparts to their contemporary communities in Northern Ireland. Historical disputes over language and land, in Ireland recorded for example by the poetry of the dispossessed, are overtaken by hermetic linguisticism and new social agendas in Muldoon's poem. In this respect, the poem tends to herald Louis de Paor's *Poems of Repossession* more than it venerates Kinsella's anthology *Poems of the Dispossessed*. Evasive and unresolved, 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' proposes a complex meditation at the start of this book and early in Muldoon's development, a reminder for future volumes that in most of his poems his language is meta-conscious, divided against itself and that, natural imagery notwithstanding, it always relates ambiguously to the political.

11 Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 11.

12 Ibid., 13.

Language remains at issue throughout the volume; its course always hard to control and determine, its functions frequently fragile, unsettled and perfidious. 'What's the fish-pond to the fish, / Avocado and avocado-dish, / But things shaped by their names?' (44), asks one poem. 'We seemed to speak the same language' (19), another states uncertainly, its past tense telling of the diminishment of communication and companionship. 'I watched a man sawing a woman in two' (51), a young boy states in 'Duffy's Circus,' with all the possibilities of illusionary magic, sexual intercourse and blatant murder. The image points to the multiplication of meaning by violent severance of wholesome bodies, for example language and sign, in a volume where the main images suggest incongruous conjunctions and cross-fertilisation, or cross-sterilisation. The uncertainties of the later 'Blemish' are presented in undecidable grammar, 'resting somewhere between a question and a detached subordinate clause' in Kendall's words.[13] Muldoon's poetic language expands its own hermeneutic terms of reference by questioning the power of naming, resisting communicative agreement, and by orchestrating polysemantic statements and adopting grammatical hybridity.

Choice of vocabulary contributes to equivocation and uncertainty and several poems conjoin larger discourses that cannot be easily reconciled. However, many of the poems tend to challenge and redirect questions of language from the public domain of 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' to a more personal sphere of shock, trauma and disaster. 'Bang' illustrates these tendencies. The title sounds the poem's paroxysm of violence, abuse and energy and its contents traverse the realms of explosion, sexual violation and poetic vitality – all of them, as the title also implies, possibly drug-induced. Revolutionary rhetoric, such as Pancho Villa's, co-opts heroic subjects and action; 'Bang' shifts the focus to victims and damage. The first line shoots down the widespread self-consoling delusion that 'it never happens to me,' in a line that also resonates with the empathic powers of artists: 'For that moment we had been the others / These things happen to' (50). What has happened is not entirely clear, but the result is devastating and nightmarish:

> Our slow coming to in a renovated clearing,
> The farfetched beginning to reassemble.
> Which of us had that leg belonged to? (50)

The fact that trees 'look the other way' and 'birds were whistling / At the ordinariness of it all' (50) charges the atrocity with natural indifference and a

13 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 50.

horrifying sense of triviality. The sudden impact brings back to the persona's mind a memory from a carnival when he witnessed a priest in a mind-boggling situation:

> Beside some girl who had lost an ear-ring,
> She moaning the name of the one who scored the goal
> Earlier that evening. (50)

Lewd and prurient, the latter episode exudes unbridled desire with explicit and grim hints of molestation. Instant associations of the two atrocities appear to indict paramilitary cruelty and ecclesiastical misconduct alike. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the two assaults implies that the two condemnable acts might ensue from similar sources: idealism, conviction, hierarchical orders, psychological suppression. But most of all, the poem brings to the fore, in the late 1970s, how the universal rhetoric of military conflict excluded debate of other issues, such as the position of women and the malpractice of religious institutions, important personal and social concerns that have since entered public discourse, sometimes in disturbing and disruptive ways. On an intra-poetic view, the poem reveals how some of Muldoon's poetic energy arises from a splicing of social trouble and individual trauma – the presentation of sex and violence in ensnaring language and form – amounting to a typical Muldoon signature, despite his own avowals of circumspection in relation to the troubles, and unwillingness to make any ideological commitments.

'The text of bliss is absolutely intransitive.'[14] In his abolition of objective criteria for subjective frissons in the erotics of reading and the pleasures of the text, Roland Barthes brings into full play the unlimited and directionless but absorbing and consuming creative energies of a boundless and non-analytical hermeneutics of heterogeneity. This vertiginous textual solipsism and hedonistic gratification contradict flagrantly any call for revolutionary language and literature, in the traditional sense. Desire, immalleable and fixated, exists in *Mules* as both motif and motivation. Erotic drives from the ordinary and ecstatic to the lewd and perverse explode and linger in many of the poems. These poems portray falls from innocence – a thematic extension of *New Weather*, and record sexual encounters of various kinds, many of them unsavoury. Depravity and moral corruption encroach upon human existence and remain a constant threat to a protected childhood and the safety of family and social networks. The intransitive, unbounded and unresolved dominate over the transitive, finite and soluble in the volume.

14 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 52.

'Cass and Me' reveals stupid behaviour in a brute while it registers at the same time a child's maturation, in what seems to be a degeneration of innocent child play in to semi-incestuous lechery: 'Which of us, I wonder, had grown, / Whose were those wide eyes at my groin?' (18) 'How to Play Championship Tennis' (19) records a young boy's encounter with the beguiling methods of a homosexual pedophile. The closet in 'The Ducking Stool' (29) indicates suppressed sexuality and a devastation of the sacred in its ominous allusion to the ostensibly reassuring biblical comfort: 'In my father's house are many rooms.' The 'narrow wardrobe / Among stinking mildewed foxes' (30) provides no realm of Lewisian fantasy to the little girl hiding in her grandfather's rectory, rather it is a locked closet of rot and predation. A mode of ghostly Ibsenesque retrospection occurs in 'Cheesecake' – slang for salacious photographs of attractive and scantily dressed women – in which a mother finds photographs of herself in her son's collection of porn stars. In 'Ned Skinner' a raw and ill-mannered dresser of pigs exposes a young child to covetous self-abasement and callousness by trying to impose himself on the child's aunt with coarse reminders of younger days. 'Boon' presents, in Muldoon's anatomy of warped desire, a rare occasion of ingenuous childhood love. 'At Martha's Deli' does not: 'So Will had finally broken off with Faith!' (47). In what is evidently an ironic quip on the belief of William III in religious wars in this sonnet, free will and religious fate are pared down to a kebab-joint affair. Title and names establish a refined, culinary contrast to the greasy menu – a framework for the tragically precocious young girl's voracity and the descent from romance to raw brutality: Faith 'might live only a year.' The sonnet ends on a gruesome beginning of an affair:

> The taste of blood on a greased knife
> Whereby she would happily drink herself to death.
> She kissed me hard. I might have been her own Will. (47)

Succeeding from an image of the kill of a hunt, the final triplet creates a portrait of a death-driven dominatrix against a backdrop of twisted sexual fantasies and vampirical suicide. Mutilated metrics and violent lyricism reinforce this excoriating presentation of a star-crossed teenage love affair, which undercuts the mature male smugness of Shakespeare's namesake in ironies of legislation, determination and sexual desire in Sonnets 135 and 136. In response to this male education 'The Girls in the Poolroom' (31) are in for a few sessions of social and erotic training in a sequestered male milieu of penned desires. With obvious vulgar play on the terminology of the sport in question and with hints of anal fixation, one of the lines seems to literalise a figure of speech: 'How

could I / But make men of them?' (31). Allusions to unprocreative sex and a nasty sense of sexual punishment suggest the girls get what they deserve for infringing on the masculine preserve. Helpless, the cool player does not fully master the situation and the urge to masculate the girls might stem from a proto-macho denial of personal feminine traits. Undefeated, Emily, the female counterpart in the poem, proves an equal partner in the power play in her challenging of his frame of mind. Linguistic lasciviousness and libidinous drives to literalise figures of speech spur the exchanges of desire in these lines. A cruder version of the later multisemiotic billiards in 'Green Gown' (*H* 19), this stanzaic sextuplet takes its cue from a game laden with vulgar Freudianism in libidinous permutations of idiom, imagery and sexual identity.

Muldoon's charting of sexual liaisons at various stages of life is shocking and surprisingly skillful. Concupiscence and sexual curiosity in their many variations belong to adolescent identity formation but the coming of age in these respects does not always include merely felicitous excitement and ingenuous romance. His incisions into the suppressed and unspoken dimensions of family life, community and social sub-cultures are disturbing and they attend to depredations which are excluded from the public eye and which evade legal consequences. The poems are concupiscent, too. The raw and the corporeal displace sublimation and romaticisation in most of these poems with motif and motivation frequently remaining indistinguishable. Erotic encounters cut into the fabric of textual conventions and the penetrant vocabulary serves to disclose the depths of human desire.

'Big Liz' presents desires removed from the domestic arena of family and procreation. In her carnal presence and burlesque performance Big Liz, the star of a male chauvinist scene of urban nightlife, enacts dual drives and gender contest in a playful performance. Obviously, the poem stages another erotic encounter, but in the light of Barthesian textuality, Heaney's critique of Muldoon's allegorical names and Scupham's claims about metaphoric poems, 'Big Liz' can be interpreted as a very attractive textual piece. Extrovert and outrageous, her performance is poles apart from the timid and cowed woman in the claustrophobic Hitchcockean paranoia in 'Elizabeth' (*NW* 32):[15]

15 Heaney has two reservations about *Mules* in his overwhelmingly positive review: 'The hermetic tendency has its drawbacks, however, and leads him into puzzles rather than poems – at least, that's my response to some of the work here as 'The Big House' and 'The Ducking Stool'; and when in different poems we find girls called Faith, Grace, Mercy, and a boy called Will, our patience with the mode gets near to the breaking point.' Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 213. See also Scupham, 'Learning from the Landscape,' 80; Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.

She opens up before us like a seam,

Stepping back through the hoops
Of flannel petticoats, the grain of trees
To the inevitability of earth. (28)

In theoretical terms, the stage artist eclipses more celestial female abstractions as an impulse to poetic creation. 'Big Liz' suggests a very seedy daughter of muses and Mother Ireland, if any relation at all can be found with the standard catalogue of idealised women from Dante to Kathleen ni Houlihan. This secularisation is also seen in the irreverent but dexterous treatment of textual garments from literary ancestors. As for allegorical names, 'Big Liz' enacts a sexual and sarcastic send up of Elizabethan virginity and Protestant plantation politics; as an athletic figure of the text, the body artist moves through many lyrical hoops. The acrobatic bending backwards to natural elements and the voyeuristic position of the audience place Heaney's poetry at the centre of these poetic circles. Feisty, and in strong opposition to moralistic taboos and social censure, the vigour of 'Big Liz' challenges the natural elements, the female victimisation and the self-accusatory engagement with the troubles in Heaney's *North*. Her stripping and exhibitionist nudity replay ironically Yeats's disrobing posture in 'A Coat' and 'inevitability of the earth' traces the rooted inspiration of Irish poetry from Heaney and Yeats back to the romanticism of the Young Irelanders.[16] Tempting chimes and enticing enjambments are deployed to evoke lust and longing in this seductive fourteen-line number and the play on 'collier' and 'collar' recalls the ribald reposte at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's romantic sonnet for the stage. In the poem, Big Liz controls a large audience of men and elicits successfully their enthusiasm, but the protagonist and a collier, weary of each other, respond differently. The collier,

16 The 'artful voyeur' of Heaney's 'Punishment' is well known, as is his championing of the chthonic element in *North*, imaged in the battle of Antaeus and Hercules that frames the first part of that collection. 'For there's more enterprise / In walking naked,' Yeats famously declares in his quest for originality. William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 1990), 142. In a celebratory revaluation of the Celtic Revival, Yeats recounts in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited': 'John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought / All that we did, all that we said or sang / Must come from contact with the soil, from that / Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.' Ibid., 369. 'To foster public opinion and make it racy of the soil' runs the well-known slogan of the Young Irelanders. For the ideas and tradition of the Young Irelanders, see Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature: From Thomas Davies to W.B. Yeats* (Sumas: BF Communications Inc., 2000). For a critique of the tendency to locate the roots of Irish poetry and literature in Romantic ideas, see David Lloyd, *Anomalous States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

perhaps one of the neighbours and previous sweethearts in 'Ma' (23) or other poems in the volume, only has an eye for the diamond in the dancer's navel; the protagonist mainly observes the miner's reactions. The miner is hypnotised by the lure of an artificial accoutrement in her body, the crystalline refinement of the dusty carbon extracted in his own professional work. With the attitude of a social anthropologist on a mission, the protagonist observes the observer. In a double take on voyeurism, both tend to reflect the positions of a poet mindful of the quality and the reception of his own art. 'Big Liz' can be read as a metaphor for poetic activity, but first and foremost Muldoon's text-tease reveals how his poetry excels in urban frissons that step out of their canonical layers (Gypsy Rose Lee is to enter the same stage in '7, Middagh Street' in *Meeting the British*), and it also shows how lofty ideas can be dismantled and dressed down by means of poetic form where language is invariably charged but playful and multivalent. In later volumes this libido of language turns increasingly polymorphous and the text-tease develops to divest the layers of a spectacular array of historicism and aesthetics.

In Barthesian terms 'De Secretis Mulierum' (43) outstrips 'Big Liz' and reveals itself as a truly blissful text: intransitive, insatiable and unbounded. In this poem, hitherto totally ignored in critical commentary, multivalent language and ekphrastic energies reveal unsettled creativity. The lines are seminal with all the characteristics that will later come to full fruition in larger formats and that will attract praise and disparagement alike: allegorical names, colloquial idiom, erudite knowledge, experimentation with sonnet forms, veiled allusions. Yet, to read this poem as a prism for his later spectrality is not to say that it does not contain its own radiance, if not brilliance. Textual secretions, multiple allusions and painterly iconography combine in an orgiastic rupture of proprieties. The title restates the title of a medieval miscellany of writing on female nature, 'Of the Secrets of Women,' by a group of religious men, normally and possibly erroneously attributed to Albertus Magnus.[17] This academic exercise analyses coitus, conception, the corruption of virginity, menses, the nature of hermaphrodites, monsters of nature, pregnancy and the influence of celestial bodies on terrestrial events. It also includes mules, horses and donkeys in a discussion of natural longevity; topics of nature that overlap with Albert Mangus's other two treatises, *De Animabilus* and *De Vegetabilus*. Muldoon's poem, in pictorial eloquence, are suggestive of these treatises:

17 For a translation of and commentaries on *De Secretis Mulierum*, see Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets* (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1992).

De Secretis Mulierum

They're nothing really, all the girls I've known
With legs up their oxters,
Their hair all blossom and their long bones
Laden with fruit,
Nothing to Harry Conway's daughter.
[...]
Well, she's the one, if you can make her out,
Whose head is full – no, not of pears, not plums –
But pomegranates, pawpaws. (43)

The Latin title sets as lofty a head note as the chiefly Irish name for armpit, 'oxters,' and the deceitful surname, 'Conway,' also known from Joyce's 'The Dead,' add an Irish glow to the pretentious bragging of the young womaniser in this voluptuous sonnet. Much less raw than 'Big Liz' and other poems, sexual explicitness here consorts with floralimages in what could be pure linguistic delight as much as humorous parody on florid language and romantic imagery. Syntactic craft ensures the irrelevance of former acrobatics and succulent excesses to both partners in the new courtship. 'Harry Conway's daughter' is singled out for affection for her exotic features by the only non-rhyming end word in the poem, 'out.' She is, nevertheless, attached to her rivals by biological figuration, but still unique. The poem is pregnant with allusions and linguistic play, targeting especially the works of Albertus Magnus, but Frost is imbricated, too, the orchard has 'scarcely been touched by frost.' The opening sexual explicitness denudes the underlying erotics of Romantic organicism, just as the vocabulary – *de vulgaris eloquentia* – takes the florid imagery for a ride. 'Tits and bums' appear in the poem. 'Tits' are a far flight from the birds of Romantic imagery: here the tits and bums obviously exude a bum-delighting vulgarity of female attributes, unconventional sexual practice and rough-sleeping loafers.

Infidelities and instinctual drives are pervasive in the poem. A three-stanza sonnet, with irregular metrics and wry linguistics that undercut high-falutin rhetoric in blusterous tones, suggests an orgiastic coupling of old traditions with contemporary linguistic hedonism. Two exclamation marks emphasise this ecstatic euphoria. Within the arena of contemporary poetics this delightful poem relates to Montague's *The Rough Field*, the floral fascination in Longley's poetry and Heaney's 'Strange Fruit' in *North*. Furthermore, as an embedded clue – 'if you can picture' – suggests, the covetous qualities of the poem branch towards yet another discursive partner: the picturesque. The pictorial prowess of the language presents the girls with all the luscious allure of O'Keefe's flower paintings or as a mockery in written form of Renoir's intention

to paint people like beautiful fruit. The arrival of new love has a touch of Botticelli's *Prima Vera*, although her head appears like one of Arcimboldo's double images. The loaded play on flowers and birds suggests Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, as much as any romantic orchard for courtship. And the sexual position of 'legs up their oxters' in the scene recalls the shocking exploitation of tradition in Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Obviously, countless other works of arts are possible candidates for the ekphrastic intercourse. *Ekphrasis*, a confluence of the verbal and the visual arts that features as a staple aspect of Muldoon's poetry, provides a non-linguistic dimension to the language of his poetry.

'De Secretis Mulierum' manifests with 'oomph' and 'ooh' a preference in Muldoon's poetry not only for desanctified morals and polytextuality, but also for frivolous language. In its passionate allusiveness and suggestive vocabulary, the sonnet demonstrates cross-generic exchanges in multilayered language which engenders multiple meanings and invites free-floating interpretations. An unsettled and, at times, polyvalent language fits well the many sexual encounters in the volume, and their concomitant states of anxiety, fear and, sometimes, delight. It makes perfect sense that such an unquiet and intransive language seeks continuously new forms and objects.

A painting from 1631 becomes the object of linguistic art in 'The Bearded Woman, by Ribera' (38). Initiating the technique of the pictorial turn – which in Muldoon's poetry also includes such poems as 'Mary Farl Powers: *Pink Spotted Torso*' and 'Edward Kienzholz: *The State Hospital*' (*Q*, 20, 21); 'Paul Klee: *They're Biting*' (MTB, 32); 'John Luke: *The Fox*' and 'Anthony Green: *The Second Marriage* and the unacknowledged ekphrasis 'Homesickness' (MSG 31, 32, 63); 'Sandro Botticelli: The Adoration of the Magi' (*Mag*, 15) and 'Charles Émile Jacque: *Poultry Among Trees*,' 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower* II' and 'Camille Pissarro: *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte*' in his latest *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (14, 30, 97) – the poem deals with language as much as religious iconography and feminism.[18] The painting is not one likely to have been part of Yeats's pre-Raphaelite imagination, or a candidate for his municipal gallery, and the poem is also left out of Edna Longley's illuminating essay 'No More

18 For elaborate projects on the sister arts in Ireland and Northern Ireland, to which Muldoon contributes together with a panorama of poets and painters, see Malcolm MacLean and Theo Dorgan, eds., *Leabhar Mor: The Great Book of Gaelic* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002); Adrian Rice and Angela Reid, eds., *A Conversation Piece* (Newry: Abbey Press, 2002). For theoretical expositions of the pictorial turn, see Mieke Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Poems about Paintings?'[19] The crossover of the linguistic and the pictorial provides Muldoon with the possibility of exploring the reservoir of his creative forces that extends far beyond the realm of literature, and into sibling arts, such as film, music and painting – arts which are essentially non-alphabetic. But the ekphrastic poem also reflects upon the conditions of language. To present visual arts in poetry, in this case Ribera's painting, probes representationalist views of language as always inadequate to the visible fact, and challenges the sympathetic adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. As an analogy for the creative act of writing – the emptiness of the white space, the clashes of representation and imagination, the tugs of tradition and innovation, the concerns for form and technique, the questions of framing – the ekphrastic poem reflects upon the conditions of language in a different mode.

'The Bearded Woman, by Ribera' takes the Spanish painter's portrait as a point of departure for exploring family constellations and the borderlines of gender – dominant topics in the volume which also echo linguistic features. In this poem Muldoon's libidinous language captures aesthetic rapture: 'I'm taken completely / By this so unlikely Madonna' (38). The other woman in the poem, 'swigging a quart of whiskey,' is also strong-willed and captivating; clearly, the women in the poem 'beard it.' Their dominant position in the poem is buttressed by the consequent feminine rhymes of the first stanza and the literality of cliché innovation marginalises the man: 'With what must be her husband / Almost out of the picture' (38). In linguistic terms the inversion of gender balances hints of the nature of language also, how language, despite all its arbitration and contingency, tends to be male dominated, as argued in the works of Parisian feminists such Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray, and as wo*man* in the title so appositely divulges.[20]

The naming of the French capital of post-structuralist philosophy in the title of 'Paris' (40) serves as a pointer to the drives of much of Muldoon's linguistics, and for this particular poem's treatment of deracination, identity and exile – all typical Muldonic themes – and for the poem's language play that is stylistically enhanced in the later 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' (*H*, 109–140). The title is even more indicative of the poem's para-onomastic play on names and semiosis of provisionality. The rapt referentiality of 'Paris,' in which the overlapping of initial plosive and vowel with Paul indicates an alphabetic connectivity with the author (and hence another subjective correlative), establishes a

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19 Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 227–252.

20 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in the Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, [1974] 1984); Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of Medusa,' *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, [1974] 1985).

multidiscursive site between Pancho Villa's Mexico and the apocalyptic illocality of the final 'Armageddon, Armageddon': the private and the personal vie for dominance with the poetic and the public. Allusions to the judgment of the Homeric hero, and to the unrequited lover of Shakespeare's tragedy, bode ill for the romantic dinner. The onomastic plurality parallels the revaluation of the fleeting personalities of two lovers:

> All the people we have been
> Are here as guests …
> […]
> A last shrimp curls and winces on your plate
> Like an embryo. 'Is that a little overdone?'
> And these country faces at the window
> That were once our own. They study the menu,
>
> Smile faintly and are gone. (40)

Veterans of their own entanglements and exhausted by their own relationship, an adolescent version in many ways of 'The Mixed Marriage' (42), they see likenesses of their earlier days in the passing pedestrians. An unsavory image 'shrimp – like and embryo,' hints at abortion and the self-referential question relates as much to the choice of image and the nature of the poem, as to their own melodrama and the preparation of the food. The restaurant setting, unattractive menu and their lack of appetite see the couple ensnared in an atmosphere of poor taste, lassitude and estrangement. 'Chicken Marengo! It's a far cry from the Moy,' the poem exclaims, in subconscious subterfuge that has several implications. Playing on polarities of cosmopolitans and culchies, the exasperation alludes to lack of courage and rectitude, with concealed textual ironies. 'Caulfield is supposed to have designed it [the Moy] on the principle of an Italian town, Marengo,' Muldoon explains.[21] Exiled in France, the couple is unaware that they were also deracinated at home. In Paris the squabbles over the shape of the table during the peace discussions of the Vietnam War frame the couple's negotiations:

> The world's less simple for being travelled,
> Though. In each fresh, neutral place
> Where our indifferences might have been settled
> There were men sitting down to talk of peace
> Who began with the shape of the table. (40)

21 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 131.

With echoes of the meditations upon table in 'Pancho Villa,' of Virgil's unfinished epic *The Aeneid*, and on the Vietnam war, when peace negotiations in Paris commenced with elaborate preliminary discussions on the shape of the table, 'Paris' renders in onomastic polysemy, semiotic shifts and intertextual convolutions the complexities of home, love and life.

In contrast to the many poems of erotic encounters, ekphrastic allusions and effervescent language, 'Ma' (23) offers a sober and solemn elegy to Muldoon's mother, to whom the book is also dedicated: 'for Anne-Marie.' Alliteration, Lawrentian ambience and familial relations link the poem to 'The Mixed Marriage.' The poem contributes to the redressing of gender balance in this book, and suggests, perhaps, a hidden frame for Heaney's elegiac sonnet sequence for his mother in *The Haw Lantern*, 'Clearances.' It can also be regarded as a response to 'The Waking Father' in *New Weather*, and to the many father figures in poetry at the time.[22] 'Ma' draws a positive and less contested portrait of the mother, although it is far from romanticising the materfamilias. The diminutive of endearment, the conversational tone and the feminine rhymes portray the mother as the centre of everyday family affection – a contrast to the Madonna in 'Our Lady of Ardboe,' the iconic lady in 'The Bearded Woman, by Ribera,' and to the many unconventional members of her sex who populate the book. 'Old photographs would have her bookish,' relates the mother ambiguously to the pornographic snapshots in 'Cheesecake' and the literate school-mistress in 'The Mixed Marriage.' Yet the mother is presented as vernal and vital in a series of pictures of premarital romance and domestic tranquility. In one photo a weeping willow forecasts the sorrows of her wake; in another, premarital romance extends memory, hesitantly, beyond the birth of the chief mourner, in intimations of his own biological serendipity. A cut-off line marks her death and the many run-on lines in the verses evoke the continuance of her spirit. The dash of compound words, 'yellow-hammer' and 'story-telling,' also infuses a broken unity to the poem. 'And the full moon swaying over Keenaghan' (23) bestows a benevolent light upon the wake, but also hints of an indifferent universe. The moon 'thins to a last yellow-hammer, and goes' (23) in a gradual installment of night-riding sorrows and pangs of grief. A final descent into the hardships and dangers of mines denies any sense of apotheosis, transcendence or divine comfort:

> Old miners at Coalisland
> Going into the ground. Swinging, for fear of the gas,
> The soft flame of a canary. (23)

22 Edna Longley: 'When did you last see you father' in *The Living Stream*, 150–172.

Bereavement and loss are configured as a constricted and sombre space to be filled by the survivors. The bird signals the inadvertent convulsions of grief and lethal explosions of pain in a community stricken by sorrow. Personal grievance is magnified by this unsentimental transition to images of a moribund industry. Commemorative but unsentimental, the linguistic sensibility of 'Ma' reveals Muldoon's ability to transpose personal emotions into high art, a sublimation of sorrow that continues in the extended and complicated elegy for his mother 'Yarrow' (*AC* 39–189), and which also characterises the mesmerising threnody for his partner Mary Farl Powers, 'Incantata' (*AC* 13–29), and reaches its apex in the monody for his stillborn child, 'The Stoic' (MSG 37).

The many contrasts in the volume, of the public and the personal, of the earthly and the heavenly, of the political and the poetic, come together in the title poem. Despite the human and linguistic darkening powerfully evident in the mule metaphor, the initial rhetorical question of the title poem sets a note of optimism by implying a felicitous union of disparities: 'Should they not have the best of both worlds?' (52). Detached, the initial line, one of Muldoon's many obliquely self-referential comments, pertains not only to the interbreeding of animals, the complex nature of people, and the many spiritual and secular dimensions of human existence in Northern Ireland and elsewhere; it also pertains to the nodal position of poets, not least Muldoon's own position, as well as the incongruity of poetic artifice and the compound qualities of language. The biological creatures in the poem are lent cosmic significance – 'the star burned in our mare's brow' – a fabulous image of cosmic and biological mystery. As providential bodies smitten with religious insignia – 'Would Parsons' jackass not rest more assured / That cross wrenched from his shoulders?' (52) – the animals embody a mixed ancestry of the celestial and the terrestrial and these mixed registers combine the carnal pull of animal procreation with biblical allusions, and with associations of human brandishing and punishment. The two neighbours controlling the covering share some of the animals' excitement, a fact silently noticed by the child of one of them: 'I watched Sam Parsons and my quick father / Tense for the punch below their belts.' Wonders of copulation recede to be replaced by melancholic meditations upon the future conception of the helpless and sterile foal, in lines where the syntax commingles the immediate past with the foreshortening of a distant future: 'It was as though they shuddered / To think, of their gaunt, sexless foal.' Finally, the conception of the hybrid beast becomes a fantastic vision of paragliding, in which the placenta is beautified as a silk parachute with archetypal associations of fall from grace overwriting the autochthonous element: 'We might yet claim that it sprang from earth / Were it not for the afterbirth / Trailed like some fine, silk parachute, / That we would know from what heights

it fell.' The copulation and marvellous birth are poised in a state of limbo and the volume's many contrary forces of the human and the beastly, the immanent and the transcendent, the feminine and the masculine, the ideal and the real are evoked. With less emphasis on the personal than the public, the poem interacts with the iconography, bipartition and language of its immediate context.

The sterile offspring of a male donkey and a female horse embodies the many dividing lines of heritage, and the distinctions of culture and gender in a hybrid state like Northern Ireland. As a durable work beast of mixed pedigree with strong biblical associations, the mule comes to symbolise the volume's concerns with the Christian and pagan traditions, the crossings of the metaphysical and the mundane, and the traversal of rural and urban borders. Likewise, the mule imagery is equestrian and involves also the contestation of the feminine and the masculine. Possible interpretations are multiple, but the implications of this interbreeding are not a naïve embrace of cultural diversity and communal integration; rather they appeal to a recognition of difference as a prerequisite for peaceful co-existence. Stark Darwinism undercuts cultural dissemination and confronts humanist optimism, since the product of interbreeding the two genera of the same family can no longer reproduce itself. Sterility is the consequence of intercourse.

Muldoon's comment, that the poem stems from a newsreel from the Korean war showing ammunition-laden mules paragliding over the battlefield, emphasises his bifocal rendition of the local situation, as does his statement that he 'was trying to explore these lives that couldn't quite reproduce themselves, and that were sterile in themselves.'[23] In the socio-political crisis at the time, such war-inflected pessimism subsumes a resignation over the disintegration of dialogue in the stern face of violence. If 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' in *New Weather* responds obliquely to Bloody Sunday, the sinister lessons of 'Mules' could be seen as a response to the Ulster Workers' Council strike that brought down the power-sharing proposals of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 and to the failure of the Nobel Prize-winning Peace Movement in 1976, the demise of both of which instilled an irrevocable sense of the relentless logjam in the communal and sectarian strife in the North. The murderous seventies also saw the gruesome savagery of the Shankill Butchers and loyalist paramilitaries, ruthless IRA campaigns and implacable state militarism. In this context, the ending of the poem in midair – in a state of suspension – alludes to this pervasive pessimism, but nevertheless issues more from a mindful recognition

23 Ted Hughes and Paul Muldoon, *Ted Hughes and Paul Muldoon: Faber Poetry Cassette* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

of communal difference than a resignation to the hopeless instransigence on all sides.

'Mules' encapsulates the mixed nature of the volume, and recognises its varied literary ancestry with self-reflexive qualities. 'You might as well affirm the existence of mules, and deny that of horses and asses,' Plato argues before the court and Muldoon's choice of metaphor also acknowledges the split nature of his literary ancestry.[24] Aesop's fables provide a miscellany of stories on mules and asses as well as horses and 'Mules' erects a counterpoint to Muldoon's own consistent horse imagery. As a figure of the poetic, the hybrid animal counterbalances his own equestrian power and purity, which run from 'Dancers at the Moy' and 'The Radio Horse' in *New Weather* through *Mules* up to and beyond *Horse Latitudes*, with mulish stubbornness and cross-fertilisation, just as 'the star burned in our mare's brow' poses an obvious retort to Pancho Villa's myopic categorisation of 'stars' and 'horses.' The mulishness of the poem also confronts Yeats as the equerry of lyrical gallantry, and relates ambiguously to Heaney's early poetry.[25] 'Mules' descends from Yeats's equestrian tropes and high-riding ascendancy spirit, and poems such as 'Tom at Cruachan' and 'Leda and the Swan,' but it recasts the whole *animus* of his cultural nationalism and the Revival, as well as much of his metaphysics and gender configurations. Similarly, Muldoon's poem relates ambivalently with the farmland fauna and organicist poetics of Heaney's early poetry, and reconfigures his literary tropes of antithesis in 'Hercules and Antaues' and, as with the Yeatsian legacy, brings together a similar combination of communal commitment, afflatus and gender. As the homophonic linkage of name with Muldoon suggests, 'Mules' also functions as a subjective correlative for the author himself. As a transporter of cargo across geographical frontiers, cultural boundaries, literary traditions and linguistic distinctions, 'Mules' embodies Muldoon's hard work on splicing geo-temporal localities, apparently contrary concepts, and the rational and

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24 Erich H. Warminton and Philip G. Rouse, eds., *Great Dialogues* (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), 433.

25 For Yeats's horse imagery, see for example 'At Galway Races,' 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,' 'Easter 1916,' 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and 'Under Ben Bulben.' Louis MacNeice attributes Yeats's equestrian vein to his aristocratic tendency: 'In pre-War years, however, before the Irish burnings, he was still pinning his faith to the Big House, and preferring to ignore the fact that in most cases these houses maintained no culture worth speaking of – nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie and a way with horses.' *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, [1941] 1967), 97. For Heaney's horses, see for example the beginning of *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

imaginative qualities of language, in this volume, as in the previous one and in those to come.

'Mules' also suggests the nodal position of language. While the mule metaphor captures the volume's conceptualisations of inbetweeness, it also indicates the restricted space between language and referentiality, between the sign and the referent, between the signifier and the signified. Metaphorically, the hybrid animal concretises the middle stance of poetry between verisimilitude and virtuality, and issues a subtle caveat to too literal-minded interpretations – quests for linguistic clarity and logical lucidity which ignore the slide and slippage of language. The word mule also designates, for example, Samuel Crompton's 1779 machine for yarn spinning. This mule, which conjoined the techniques of Arkwright's woof-machine with Hargreave's hand-jenny, recalls the industrial tradition of Northern Ireland, particularly its textile production of linen, and looms large as an obvious metaphor for the weaving of new texts by innovative techniques based on established means of production, a mechanical undercurrent to the biological flow of the poem. Furthermore, mule, in the sense of a slipper or light shoe with an open back worn especially by women, wrings from the word a sense of femininity which suits the balancing of feminine and masculine feet in the verses, and the gender struggles in many of the volume's poems. Words continuously mule their own meanings in Muldoon's poetry, in their linguistic restiveness and semantic shifts. 'Mules' contains a warning against the settlement of transparent language and hermeneutic literalism.

The impurity of the mule metaphor finds its counterpart in Muldoon's images of incongruity – centaurs, merman, bearded woman, blemish – and in his ekphrasis and blending of genres, his mongrel idiom and his coupling of discourses. 'The Merman,' an obvious hybrid relative of mules, manifests the volume's tendency to conjoin and confront disparate worlds and discourses in a language that never finally confirms and confines. Kendall is right in reading the poem as 'a powerful parable of sectarian societies.'[26] However, the sonnet's dream logic, its topology of sea and land and its self-conscious enactment of the Latin *versus* – the ploughing and turning of lines of poetry as much as farmland – resonate with the artistic undulations of fantasy and veracity, the linguistic dilemma of free-floating signifiers and representationality, and the many choices of form. Similarly, 'The Mixed Marriage' shifts its semantics from the religious and socio-political divisions the title immediately evokes to negotiations of parental differences and the two traditions of agriculture and education: 'I flitted between a hole in the hedge / and a room in the Latin

26 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 47.

Quarter' (42). With exultant humour, 'Largesse' splices the religious and the ribald, the spiritual and the sexual – 'numberless cherubim and seraphim / Alleluia on my prick' (44) – in a voluptuous appraisal of gastronomic, erotic and poetic appetites, and a rejuvenation of the old scholastic dismissal of angelology. The film-noir-ambient 'The Country Club,' as the private eye's name Lee Pinkerton indicates, conjoins the poetry of Robert Lee Frost with Pinkerton National Detective Agency, which is, significantly, associated with crime mystery writer Dashiell Hammet, in what is as much a poetic plot as a murder mystery. In 'Epona,' which evokes the myths of the Gallo-Roman goddess of horses, matters of personal relations or artistic struggle assume priority over religious, political and historical battles, in a sexually charged language. In the imagery of alpine expeditions, 'The Rucksack' maps the poetic process of tracing the textual tracks of literary forerunners, and the rediscovery of your own tracks in the work of somebody else – an interesting figuration of Bloomian anxiety of influence. 'The war has been over', 'these thirty years' (41) in 'The Narrow Road to The Deep North,'where a Japanese soldier appears from the woods in an evocation of Basho's life and poetry, a forerunner for 'The Point' (*H* 10), and a not exactly subtle allusion to the status quo of poetry in the wars. 'The Big House,' one of the poems in the collection criticised by Heaney for being a hermetic puzzle poem, enacts the genre well known from Yeats's poetry and from novels by Edgeworth, Bowen, Farrell and numerous others.[27] 'The Centaurs,' a miniature of 'Madoc – A Mystery' (*Mad* 13–261), triangulates in its beastly and human symbolism the religious fervour of the colonial discourses of the Romans, the Spanish and the British. 'Keen,' in the sense of Irish funeral song and in all its meanings as adjective, activates the tradition of Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill's 'Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire.' Muldoon's version emphasises the female role in the drama, foregrounds private grief more than political conflict, and points directly to its origins in the Gaelic language tradition, '*after the Irish*' (24). All these texts illustrate that Muldoon's language is always also an intertextual one; each and all of his poems are placed in a literary context, whether this context is made explicit, as here, or left somewhat less specific.

27 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 213. Some famous big house novels are: Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800); Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929); J.G. Farrell, *Troubles* (1970). See also MacNeice's comment on the Big Houses and 'hollow aristocracy' in Yeats, 'these houses maintained no culture worth speaking of,' in footnote 25 above. Deane claims Yeats as the genius and originator of the Big House tradition: 'The survival of the Big House novel, with all its implicit assumptions, is a tribute to the influence of Yeats and a criticism of the poverty of the Irish novelistic tradition.' Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 32.

'Armageddon, Armageddon,' continues from the final poem in *New Weather* Muldoon's consistent trademark of ending each collection with a longer complex poem that incorporates and further develops many of the volume's intricate strands. This seven-sonnet sequence, perhaps a week's diary of troubles, responds to the claims by Pancho Villa in the opening poem, incorporates many of the concerns and styles of the preceding poems, and ponders upon the effects of poetry and language. In its response to the peremptory proclamation of Pancho Villa, this poem's ambiguous treatment of the immanent and the transcendent, the local and the cosmic, the public and the personal and the actual and the artistic, does not articulate a downright declaration of independence; rather, it develops and differentiates the principles of Villa's fiat. To some degree, it presents in poetic form a transition from historical materialism, class struggle, revolution and committed literature in Marxist theory, towards radical critique, emancipatory promise and enquiry into cultural identities, while utilizing a self-aware aesthetics. This tendency also includes views of language: Pancho Villa advocates a language subservient to political purpose; the final poem maintains that language, particularly poetic language, can never be directly foreclosed.

'You want to get down to something true, / Something a little nearer home' (11), demands Pancho Villa. Parts of 'Armageddon, Armageddon' read like a guided tour of Northern Ireland; yet, the verses also question local allegiance, and, as the title reveals, cast local place against apocalyptic eschatology. In its biblical allusions the title echoes religious beliefs and grand rhetoric pertinent to Northern Ireland and beyond, but Armageddon also subsumes Muldoon's birthplace Armagh – borderland, bandit country and war zone from 1923 to 1998. 'I'm very interested in the way in which a small place, a parish, can come to stand for the world,' Muldoon says, in a logic well established in Irish poetics since Patrick Kavanagh's famous 'Epic.'[28] Public matters in a local place are projected onto a larger dimension, as are the personal vicissitudes of divorce and his mother's death. The elevation of individual anguish and social conflict to the ultimate annihilation of the world exaggerates the scales, but this catastrophic magnitude reveals the sense of endless despair concerning the volume's treatment of personal loss and civil war.

Thematically, stylistically and linguistically, the final poem reports back to Pancho Villa's peremptoriness. Villa demands direct recording of revolutionary acts in terms of 'news' and people 'getting themselves killed' (11). 'Armageddon, Armageddon' juxtaposes social injustice and political violence with personal trauma, as well as actuality and political slogans with myth and literary

28 Muldoon in interview with Kendall, 1981, 130–131.

allusions. Although poems in this book observe Villa's condemnation of 'rondeaux,' they otherwise show a great flexibility of form that both questions and confirms Villa's implicit repudiation of poetic artifice. The final series of verses are transgressive of the traditional sonnet form, a poetic strategy that reflects radical revisions of established conventions, but also a form that reflects disintegration. 'Armageddon, Armageddon,' as most of the poems in the volume, challenges Villa's limited understanding of language.

A linguistic trick, Larry Durrell's 'Snow-White Villa' (53), at the start of the first sonnet bridges the poem with 'Lunch with Pancho Villa,' and alludes to 'The Big House' and the 'bougainvillea' of 'The Country Club.' 'Mouse Island,' as its national tricolour of 'white villa,' 'orange' and 'olives' indicates, puts Ireland in its place in the cosmic scales and undercuts with great irony any aggrandising self-pity, whether of the personal or the national kind. Durrell dubbed his most famous work, *The Alexandria Quartet*, an investigation of modern love – an apt reference for the journey of the couple in this text too, perhaps the same couple as in 'Paris.' 'Spitting the stars,' the sonnet ends, an obvious retort to Pancho Villa's limited definition of the term, in an ambiguous inflection of supplication, fellatio and linguistic confabulation. This kind of intralinguistic and intratextual referencing marks the sequence, and adds a sense of typical Muldonic closed circuit surveillance to the closing poem.

The verses of 'Armageddon, Armageddon' tone down marital disintegration, but they exude political antagonism, family strife and local setting. 'Lambeg drum,' 'Orange Lodge,' and 'No Surrenders' (55) beat with the pulse of sectarian division. Family members have lost their voice, have been subjected to violence, and are in the final throes of death: 'Our mother bent-double / Over the kitchen sink … We would bury her when we were able' (58). 'Ireland' (54), 'Derryscollop,' 'Clovenden' and 'Armagh' (55) designate nation and location. These actualities are balanced by allusions to the life and literature of Lawrence Durrell, Baudelaire, W.R. Rodgers and Swift, and to the myth of Oisín. A specific stratum of linguistic contemplation can also be detected throughout the verses.

However much the linguistic finesse of the final sonnet series references its immediate time and place, it also refers to its own beliefs and doubts about language. The whole volume asserts, in response to Pancho Villa's directives, the right to write about 'stars and horses, pigs and trees' (11), although the meanings of these words are continuously reconfigured in a critique of Villa's limited understanding of them. 'Armageddon, Armageddon,' aptly teases out the meanings of the word 'star.' The stars being spat in the first sonnet, possibly by a mundane *spéirbhean*, heavenly woman, are of a very indeterminate nature. The return of both Oisín and the persona to Ireland (54) is cast within the

cliché of a star falling to earth. The line 'Why not brave the Planetarium' (55) introduces, with earnestness and irony, scientific star-gazing. The journey of the two lovers is not written in the stars: 'Our tickets / Ratified by their constellations' (56); on the other hand, sonnet five inscribes daily life in the signs of the Zodiac. Traditional use of figurative star imagery presides over the final verses, when on a dark and fearful night, the persona extends his compassion to a beetle crawling along his palm:

> My hand might well have been some flat stone
> The way it made for the underside.
> I had to turn my wrist against its wont
> To have it walk in the paths of uprightness. (59)

The extension of sympathy to an insect, which is a most likely target for violent extinction by human hands, poses a compassionate contrast to the prevailing sense of individual difficulty, civil outrage and religious perdition, and is indicative of a non-violent empathy forged outside the spheres of military command and religious fundamentalism. The dexterity that redirects the beetle's downward course gestures towards the importance of changing perspectives, perhaps by a poet's hand. This faint glimmer of hope at the end of the apocalypse provides an unassuming vision of poetry and language; how little its vital importance matters on the great scale of things, and how a little twist, of a word or of phrase, can result in a radical change of outlook, and, possibly, change in the course of events.

If the question of aesthetic detachment or communal commitment directed the negotiations and affiliations of poets in Northern Ireland in the mid 1970s, Muldoon questions in *Mules* that very question. The hybridity of the animal symbolises as much, as does the idea of Muldoon himself as a mule carrying baggage between different traditions and across various boundaries, whether those between the poetic and the political, or those between Yeats and Joyce, between members of the Belfast group, or those internal ones in language *per se*. Muldoon's subjective correlatives in *Mules* – Mulerium, Merman, Mixed Marriage; Paris and Paul; Armagh and Armageddon – contribute to the questioning of the responsibilities and representations of poetic language by blurring the distinctions between the public and the personal, the factual and the fictitious. A semiotic mongrel in itself, the title moves beyond natural imagery and religious iconography, literary reference and equestrian tropology and tropes of transport and industrial metaphors to reveal a type of spliced and stubborn linguistics. Unsurprisingly, then, this offspring of an ass and a mare points to linguistic contraband and to layers of lewdness, utterly

'other' word definitions, flights of fancy, line-wise syntax and cross-generic form, and to all those moments when language and poetry are not at one with themselves. If the maximisation of the instability of form, syntax and singular words, as that of the single letter, is a feature to increase dramatically in later volumes, it exists already in *Mules*. Juvenile and juicy, ekphrastic and onomastic, clear and contradictory, this language splices and shifts, combines and confronts. In *Mules*, Muldoon's poetic language offers resistance to the many commands that impinge upon poetry with words that continuously mule their own meaning.

CHAPTER 3

Why Brownlee Left

Although Muldoon relishes 'the rhyme on "Aristotle" and "bottle"' in Byron's epic *Don Juan*, he still claims 'Beppo' as 'my own favourite.'[1] His savouring of the palatable and alphabetic rhyme, his unconventional preference (in canonical terms) for Byron and his idiosyncratic choice of 'Beppo' are indicative of the rhyming panache and the canonical negotiations of his own language and poetry. Muldoon's identification with Byron indicates other similarities and signals an, as yet, unexplored framework for his own poetic priorities. Both Byron and Muldoon write of solemn concerns in irreverent form and they adopt radical attitudes while maintaining allegiances to traditional form. Furthermore, Byron's peregrinations, both in literature and life, posit a very viable template for Muldoon's language and concerns in *Why Brownlee Left*, which overlap, develop and differ from *Mules*.

In *Mules*, language contains its own alterity and continuously transforms its own conditions and consequences in a double take on the reality it both acknowledges and distances itself from. Bestiality of many sorts, eroticism too, not least linguistic, paronomasia, ekphrastic oscillations and a mulish resistance to ordinary directives and orders of language weld and wrench new meanings in this volume. Such intransigent and intransitive language seems pertinent to a condition that does not yield itself easily to representation of any kind – linguistic, musical or visual – a condition which Muldoon's poetic language refracts and refigures as much as it represents. Whereas *Mules* imagines hybrid identities and mixed cultures, and tends to release the spontaneous as well as the sterile of compressed spaces, whether these are considered to be geographical, traditional, political, poetic or linguistic, or a composite of these, *Why Brownlee Left* seems to reflect upon the complexities of origin, ancestry and identity, and to explore the terrains of exit, emigration and effacement. Evidently, these two clusters of themes are connected in terms of time, place and self and the whole volume traces these interrelations. In fact, the notions of trace and tracing inform the volume. Tracing, a comprehensive search for evidence, addresses adroitly the mystery the title (*Why Brwonlee Left*) articulates, but also has much wider implications. The act of pursuing non-material dimensions of an event that seems to be lost but which still bears upon the past and the present and the future, brings into question the understanding of

1 Paul Muldoon, ed. *The Essential Byron* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989), 5.

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such terms as origin and identity, emigration and becoming.[2] These themes are explored in a language that defines and deflects these very themes, but which is also shaped and modulated by them.

A language that incessantly traces itself, *adlinguisticism*, alters constantly, not only the questions themselves and their potential answers and solutions, but the very conditions under which these questions and answers might be arrived at. Just as a sign is a unity of heterogeneity and distemporalities – the signifier is not the signified, the signifier assumes and resumes its fleeting identities by contrast to other signifiers – and just as language hovers on the brink of itself and that to which it might refer, ideas of origin, identity and becoming cannot be constituted except reciprocally with non-identities and non-origins; their own traces which transform and engender new possibilities. A differing, deferring and modulating language is not merely a contrived linguistic imposition upon wholesome ideas of ancestry and extraction, homogeneity and belonging, it brings forth new implications for these ideas not previously considered. Such conditioning of the concepts of origin, identity and becoming generates alternative histories and futures, other identifications and other alternatives. Muldoon understands well this sense of the trace as not an alternative to origin and identity, a non-origin or separate other, but as constituent of the originary and identarian, and that the trace relates as much to the future as to the past:

> One of the ways in which we are most ourselves is that we imagine ourselves to be going somewhere else. It's important to most societies to have the notion of something out there to which they belong, that our

2 A direction from past to future is imbricated in many of the discourses that have been dominant in Ireland, for example the movement from genesis to revelation in religious discourses and from history to revolution in radical ones, but in most of these, temporal divisions are exact. That the Irish are prisoners of their own past waiting in vain for release is a cliché in poetic imagination that runs at least from the onset of Christianity via the poets of the dispossessed and the retrospective aspects of the Revival to the atavism of Heaney's *North*. Frank O'Connor discusses the heart of this matter in *The Backward Look* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1967). Perforce, the focus on future has existed as a countervailing discourse. The future of Irish literature, and by implication the nation and not least his own destiny, is prevalent in Thoams MacDonagh's *Literature in Ireland*, and calibrated in his declaration that 'The futurists may be charlatans, or fools, or lunatics. They may be prophets.' *Literature in Ireland* (Tyone: Relay Books, [1916] 1996), 3. 'The Irish are futurologists of necessity,' Declan Kiberd avers in 'Anglo-Irish Attitudes' in Deane et al., *Ireland's Field Day*, 95. For the unfolding of a future for an Irish nation incessantly traced and tracing, see Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*.

> home is somewhere else … there's another dimension, something around us and beyond us, which is our inheritance.[3]

Why Brownlee Left, as the title indicates, reports on a special case, a disappearance, an absence, the possibility of appearing somewhere else; a double sense of self, place and time that was there from the start. This mystery leaves a hermeneutic vacuum to be filled with meaning, a void to be lamented or welcomed. Only traces remain of Brownlee in the title poem, which is centrally placed as number fourteen of twenty-seven poems in a series that is redoubled by the final recursive journey, 'Immram.' Absence appears at the centre of the volume, an absence in which Brownlee is traceable, a disappearance which allows for his many metamorphoses throughout the verses.

The volume investigates the reasons for departure – *Why Brownlee Left* – many of which are also adumbrated in previous volumes, with questions of who, when, where and how waiting in the wings, in a poetic language that cannot be easily aligned with ideas of rootedness and unitary selfhood. All the possible departures and arrivals in the volume recall epic journeys, Homeric and Gaelic. All the questions surrounding Brownlee recall an Oedipal quest for identity and destiny. Just as Oedipus's fate is prefigured by his name and fulfilled by the stratagems to evade his predestined fate, Brownlee, as many other characters in the volume, is ultimately ensnared by forces of which he is unaware, or conditions he assumes he has escaped. In this unresolved case, language not only relates the mystery; the mystery tends to reflect upon the inscrutable course of linguistic action. *Why Brownlee Left* conducts imaginative and inconceivable interrogation into ideas of origin and identity, departures and arrivals, chronology and narrativity, and into the mysteries of language. An astonishing ability to *un*think essential concepts and crucial events of the human condition dominates the poems, and their language. This volume and these verses present *alterratives,* the integral aspects of alterity in multiple modes of narrative, a number of alter egos in formative processes of self, and versions of unrealised pasts and potential futures.

Muldoon's third volume traces several previous concerns in his poetry. 'Like the last of an endangered species' (8) the final line of the opening 'Whim' states of the interlocked love-making couple in the Botanic Gardens of Belfast and 'The Boundary Commission' records the stasis of a narrowing horizon: 'He stood there, for ages, / To wonder which side, if any, he should be on' (15). The lines are replete with the menace of extinction and the numerous states of in-betweennness that loom large in Muldoon's first two volumes, also with an

3 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 141.

acute intuitive sense of the vagaries of experimental poetic language. The volume's title also reflects these threats and divisions: did Brownlee leave by his own will? Why? Who was he? When did he leave? Where has he gone? For good? Will he come back? Was he forced to go? By whom? Why? Is he still alive? What has happened? What will happen now? Questions of this kind have an obvious existential quality to them, but they touch a raw nerve in a society of high emigration and a frighteningly high rate of unexplained disappearances, such as was the situation in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The title certainly suggests an inquiry – psychological, sociological, demographic or judicial – into the truths and falsehoods of a specific subject, possibly against the allegations, inference and slander launched by other parties. The title's reportorial matter-of-factness contains uncertainties too, as the interrogative pronoun upsets the affirmative statement from the very beginning. Furthermore, the alternative contexts of the initial pronouncement are uncertain and range from individual viewpoint or judgment, news headlines, specific case studies in surveys of demographic change and other kinds of formal documents or public debates. The position of the statement at the crux of several actual scenarios and a multidiscursive undecidability suggests that whenever the idea of truth becomes multivalent and perspectival, this is not, as is often claimed by detractors of deconstruction, only a result of language manipulation. Notions of truth subsist between their own ideality and the actualities of life. Any metaphysical idea of truth transports the concept beyond its empirical and ontological actuality; truth based upon the life of the living present enters the problems of relativity. Truth is neither substance, nor essence, and hardly ever present as such; it is frequently obscure, partial and transient, and often takes the form of arbitration, conflict, compromise and consensus. In this respect, the language of Muldoon's third volume questions many uncontested notions that have established themselves but which deserve closer scrutiny.

Why Brownlee Left, an aetiology of disappearance, traces the impact of metaphysics, history, social conditions and mental states upon individual decision. 'That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving,' Maureen states in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.[4] Perhaps at no time since the First World War has this sense of departure and the decision to remain been more heartfelt than in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s, when the conflict stagnated into deadlock and produced a strong wish on the part of many inhabitants to leave behind tragic events of a personal, tribal and communal nature in an environment that appeared to hold no future. Muldoon does not

4 Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (London: Methuen, 1996), 21.

exempt himself from this mood; the volume posits another correlative, perhaps slightly less subjective than previous ones. A total of twenty-eight poems in the book, the number of twenty-nine lines in the opening poem, 'Whim,' and the sum of thirty stanzas in the final climax, 'Immram,' figure the age of the author at the time of the poems' composition and publication. The numerological signature inscribes his personal life span upon the many dimensions of the book. Meanderings in the mystery of language ensure the creative Muldonic signature.

'Why Brownlee Left,' the volume's title poem, is central to the volume in many ways. Its verses assemble and distribute the answers and questions to the mysterious disappearance of Brownlee: 'Why Brownlee left, and where he went, / Is a mystery even now' (22). *Why Brownlee Left* attends to departures, arrivals and journeys as reigning tropes of the book and these tropes pit individual existence against the questions of origin, freedom and fate in a manner that tends to problematise these very concepts. Alterratives abound. Centrally placed as the pivotal point of the book, the title poem divides the twenty-eight poems in two halves. It is both preceded and succeeded by thirteen poems; the long, final finish, 'Immram,' enacts a powerful doubling of them all. Although the two halves of the book intersect and are linked, the first sequence tends to sketch situations and events that all impart incentives for leaving; the second section tends to enact departures of various kinds. In this temporal scale, the moment of Brownlee's disappearance moves beyond, as the enjambment of the final verse illustrates, past possibilities and future alternatives. The poem also renders the significance of the single letter and the poetic specifics of language as major concerns of the volume.

That so many words associated with the quest for understanding – why, who, when, where, what – or the processes of rendering meaning in alphabetic form – word, write, writhe, wring, warp, weave, wend, wiggle, waggle, wrestle, wreak, wreathe and wrench – involve the letter w might be coincidental. Nevertheless, its mere visuality evokes prolonged twining and twinning and its phonetic variables are intricate. The 23rd letter of the modern English alphabet is an addition to the ancient Roman alphabet which originates from a ligatured doubling of the Roman letter represented by the U and V of modern alphabets. The ordinary sign for the phoneme [w] was at first a double u, uu, which was superseded by a character from the Runic alphabet, W, and it has never lost its original name of 'double U.' Interrogatives, split etymologies and the doubling of semi-identical letters capture with alphabetic inscription the mystery of Brownlee's personality, background and disappearance. The twinning and twining of the alphabet's well-wrought ws in the name and verses spell out Brownlee's dilemmas. The ten ws of these verses, especially the five

ws of the two first lines, impose a compelling sense of overlapping dualities to the protagonist's psychology and to his historical roots, social situation and disappearance, and to his transition between the past and the future as well as in the poetic presentation thereof. Just as the w has ceased to be pronounced in a few words, for example write, answer, sword and two, the letter actually documents something which has disappeared. Has Brownlee been squeezed out of existence or made invisable by double pressure or liberated by dual possibilities?

Brownlee is confined, perhaps even defined, within the strict horizons of his rural environment. An estimate of human happiness in an itemised list of agricultural products – two acres of barley, / One of potatoes, four bullocks / A milker, a slated farmhouse – circumscribes horizons, and threatens to asphyxiate individual aspirations and the instant fame of Brownlee's disappearance reveals the exceptional nature of the event. At the start of a new day, at the back end of a bad season, somewhere between two stanzas, the main character vanishes in the poem's *volta*, an 'ambiguous, unwittingly existential gesture' in the words of Alan Jenkins.[5] His escape is also measured in the octave's quick departure from the standard foot and meter. Similarly, the sestet does not bring forth the form's conventional resolution. Where the lineal syntax and rhyme pattern of the first verses hold some sense of fixity, the latter ones move with uncertainty in enjambment and aural resonances that tend to depart from their own sounds: 'with' and 'wife'; 'famous,' 'foot to,' 'future.' Anthropomorphic horses project a lack of marital union in Brownlee's life, and capture a sense of restless stasis, while on the page, they transcend elegantly in the enjambment 'black / Horses' the confines of verse and time, and stare into the future into which Brownlee might have transported himself.

The alphabetic amalgamation so central to Brownlee's name and the many departures and equivocations of these verses suggest the absence of single solutions to his mystery. Alan Jenkins interprets Brownlee as 'a farmer who uproots himself, leaving his smallholding,' and the poem as 'resonant with both blazing self-assertion and utter blankness.'[6] Derek Mahon also takes this view of Brownlee as a fictional representative of the not uncommon event when a bachelor farmer 'simply walks out of his house, and takes a ship to America, without a word to a soul; he goes lightly, unencumbered by regret or personal possessions, and is never heard of again.'[7] Tim Kendall and Clair Wills take

5 Alan Jenkins, 'The Art of Gentleness,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 November 1980, 1287.

6 Ibid.

7 Derek Mahon, 'Long Goodbye,' *London Review of Books*, 20 November – 4 December 1980, 6–7.

their interpretation from Muldoon who declares: 'Brownlee suggests a brown meadow, a ploughed field, and so – in a strange sort of way – his end is in his name, he's fulfilled his purpose even before he begins.'[8] Brownlee might have emigrated to forge a new future in America, England or elsewhere or he might have been smothered by his own craft and tradition, as a recent avatar of Patrick Maguire in Patrick Kavanagh's enactment of sterile farm life in 'The Great Hunger.' The removal of a w in the text, a false clue, an ostentatious visual marker of something disappeared, confirms where he has gone: 't(w)o acres of barley.' However, the poem is not necessarily a singular keystone in the volume since these two options coincide with one another: the choice of departure often ends in stasis and the choice of staying results in other forms of departure throughout the texts.

'Why Brownlee Left' is closely connected to the preceding 'Anseo' and the succeeding 'Immrama' by thematic links, textual proximity and formal features. Like poetic clauses in the volume's syntax, these variegated sonnets combine and contrast each other. Bownlee's unresolved destinies and disappearance reflect the static confinment's fulfillment of the former and the disappointment of departure of the latter. Conversely: does the IRA Commandant of 'Anseo,' in a menacing way, have anything to do with Brownlee's disappearance? Does Brownlee reappear in 'Immrama' as the Nazi on the verandah in Brazil, or as the son trailing his spirit? Or as the persona in 'an hotel room in New York City' in 'Quoof' in the next collection? Or the many other silenced or mobile characters throughout subsequent volumes? Does the Gaelic language in the title of the two first poems insinuate a constriction from which Brownlee liberates himself, or does it indicate the impossibility of self-realisation in a life and culture that has largely been deprived of its natural language? Questions accumulate in the poem and in the book and the answers are confused, as are the ideas of origin, identity and language. In theme, form and language 'Why Brownlee Left' assembles and disassembles many of the volume's underlying currents.

'I use names perhaps far too often in a Johnsonian, emblematic way,' Muldoon concedes, and tips his hat to Heaney's critique of this mode in *Mules*, but of his many emblematic names in this volume – Will Hunter, Bran, Golightly, Billy Wetherall, Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward – Brownlee, as well as Coulter and Foster, sounds less obtrusive and better grounded.[9] In colour and declension, the name, almost a pronominal shirt of Nessus, echoes the darker doctrines of

8 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 140; Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 68–69; Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 77–78.

9 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 140; Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 213.

'blut und boden,' and the dissemination in Ireland of a mixed legacy of German ideology, history and culture, one also heard in other poems such as 'Early Warning,' 'Ireland,' 'Anseo,' 'Immrama,' 'Truce' and 'The Princess and the Pea.'[10] Brownlee's involvement with cultivating the land and his possible fates also resonate with the agriculture of 'Early Warning' and 'Lull,' the expatriation of 'Immrama' and 'Promises, Promises,' the territorial conquest of 'Truce,' and the horrific decomposition and entombment in 'The Princess and the Pea,' 'Grief' and 'Come into My Parlour.' 'Why Brownlee Left' is also a poem about poetry, and about linguistic complexities.

Agricultural activity has functioned as an image of poetic creativity from Hesiod's *Works and Days* via Romantic organicism to different strands of contemporary poetry. 'Why Brownlee Left' ambivalently evokes this tradition. The poem plays on the Latin *versus*, the double meaning of ploughing the furrow in a field of rural cultivation and poetic creation, and on the almost identical phonetics of versus and verses. Their abbreviations as v. and v. also meet in the poem's significant w. Semi-stopped, fully-stopped, run-on lines and the volta enact a register of departures, transitions and arrivals. The ambiguity of Brownlee's fate, whether he bolts from or is buried in his plot, suggests Muldoon's own double bind in relation to organicist poetics – for example his novel readings of Frost, his productive resistance to parts of Heaney's chthonic groundedness, his ambiguous deployment of and many departures from this poetic idiom in his own poems, and his preference for Byron among the Romantics.[11]

Byron's poetry emerges as an interesting and scarcely discussed source of inspiration for Muldoon's poetry during this period. In his introduction to *The Essential Byron*, Muldoon argues:

10 Links with German history go back to the Celtic age, but became a more sensitive point in Ireland and Northern Ireland at least after Irish neutrality during the Second World War and De Valera's condolence on the death of Hitler. Aspects of Lutheran beliefs and fascist doctrine are easily traced in the ideologies of Loyalist and Republican organisations. Muldoon foregrounds the dilemmas of 'race-consciousness,' 'racial blood-music' and 'pure poetry' in the dispute between Louis MacNeice and Kevin Higgins in the enigmatic prologue to his edition of *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 17–18.

11 In his comments on Frost's poetry Muldoon continuously attends to the linguistic aspects of the American Laureate's poetry, 'his apparently simple, almost naïve, tone of voice and use of language, under which all kinds of complex things are happening,' 'his mischievous, sly multi-layered quality under the surface' and the 'undercutting of what he seems to be saying.' Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 134; Michael Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' *Chicago Review* 35, no. 1 (1985), 84. Muldoon includes many of Heaney's organicist poems in his *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, but none of his bog poems.

> Byron's mature style is wonderfully discursive, ranging from Aristotle through hitting the sack to hitting the bottle sack, while relishing the rhyme on 'Aristotle' and 'bottle' along the way; he reminds us again and again that poetry can be serious without being solemn, that it might even be fun.[12]

Byron's poetry prevails as a presiding spirit over *Why Brownlee Left*. The major reason for this is Byron's many departures, arrivals and circumambulations, and his sensitivity to language and his relishing of humour, pun, rhyme and pleasure. The Romantic renegade's propensity for eccentric rhymes – 'ragouts / stews,' 'Improvisatori / also tell a story,' 'Cicisbeo / Cortejo / Po to Teiro,' and 'polacca / tobacco' which could easily be added to Muldoon's example of 'Aristotle / bottle' – remains a tuning fork for Muldoon's own saucy sounds and macaronic coinages. Byron's susceptibility to narrative also parallels Muldoon's knack for alterrative.[13] Furthermore, Muldoon's choice of Byron over the other Romantics indicates a preference for a transitional figure of neoclassical wit and irony over the profuse emotionalism and revolutionary poetics of his Romantic contemporaries. Byron's *pro patria* partitions, expatriate wanderings, erotic nerve, poetic pugilism and submersion in continental classicism are all attractive features to Muldoon which leave their imprint on *Why Brownlee Left*. His choice of including 'Beppo' *in toto* in his edition of Byron tightens the links:

> I wanted to avoid as much as possible the chopping up of poems into kindling, but could not (as with 'Don Juan') manage it entirely. On the other hand, my choice of a complete, longer poem like 'Beppo' over, say 'The Siege of Corinth' may strike some readers as being whimsical. That, I'm afraid, is a risk I have to take.[14]

'Don Juan,' obviously, needs to be chopped due to its length; Muldoon's other preferences here indicate a prioritisation of linguistic insouciance and personal affairs over historical events and political matters. Attitudinal identifications between Byron and 'Beppo' probably extend to Muldoon's own subjective correlatives. As an adventurous romance steeped in cultural reference and replete

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12 Muldoon, *The Essential Byron*, 5.

13 For Byron's adventures and his European importance, see, for example: Hippolyte Taine, *The History of English Literature*, trans. H. Van Laun, 4 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, [1863–1867] 1897), vol 4, 1–70; Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, [1941] 1996), 651–660, 716–722. George Gordon Byron, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), 625–634.

14 Muldoon, *The Essential Byron*, 5.

with dramatic dialogues and auto-narrational comments, 'Beppo' suggests an interesting counterpoint to the poems in *Why Brownlee Left*, not least to the romantic encounter in the opening 'Whim,' and to the outlandish escapades in the final 'Immram.'

Did Brownlee leave on a whim? Perhaps he did. 'Whim,' the first poem of the collection, does not discount the possibility. Muldoon defends sudden and seemingly unmotivated impulse as an artistic prerogative in his choice of 'Beppo' (and perhaps Byron too) and in *Literature in Ireland* Thomas MacDonagh argues that 'whimsicality is an Irish characteristic as definite as any.'[15] Byronic impetuosity and Gaelic culture co-exist in 'Whim,' which is decked out with amorous caprice and love of Celtic lore by way of idiomatic conversation and grim ironies. A casual dialogue in 'the Europa Hotel' on the manuscripts and translators of the myth of Cu Chulainn – the Hound of Ulster – leads to a somewhat steamy fling in 'the Botanic Gardens':

> To cut not a very long story short,
> Once he got stuck into her he got stuck
> Full stop.
> They lay there quietly until dusk
> When an attendant found them out.
> He called an ambulance, and gently but firmly
> They were manhandled on a stretcher
> Like the last of an endangered species. (8)

Perhaps the first poem ever on human dog-knitting, this canine temper of human desire in the horticultural conservatory unleashes linguistic deviations and infidelities, as much as natural and erotic ones. The copulation sweats with the cross-fertilisation of many sorts beyond the beastly and the human: the Gaelic and the English, the old and the new, the conventional and the creative. The title word is indicative of Romantic spontaneity and Irish character and the poem implies a renewal of the Hiberno-English language tradition. In the verses, this is represented by Kuno Meyer's and Standish O'Grady's translations of the Cu Chulainn myth – and how new generations take over from older. But the image of natural regeneration does not correspond totally to cultural activity: the speaker in the poem prefers Meyer's older translation to Grady's newer. Lineation, lexical choice and sounds are also subject to risky copulation and regeneration. The graphic line stop cuts short the flow of verse as much as the protagonists' ecstatic intercourse and assonantal gradation and

15 MacDonagh, *Literature in Ireland*, 8.

sibilant sounds in the masculine end words take over for rhyme harmony. The aftermath is finally rendered in *deibhidhe* sound patterns, passive tense and a vocabulary of casualty and immanent death. Conversely, the poem inseminates the cliché of 'the Europa Hotel' in Belfast as the 'most-bombed hotel in the world' with the normal life of drinking, intellectual debate and flirtation. This poetic counter-cliché and the poem's enactment of poetic and linguistic transformation anticipate in the imaginative realm the reconstruction and the revivification the hotel experienced after the ceasefire – a presentiment in poetic artifice of actual progress in architecture and social life that also characterises the many other poems in the volume that depict and depart from the sites of Belfast: 'The One Desire,' which describes the derelict palm-house in the Botanic Gardens that has since been renovated, and 'The Weepies' and 'History.' Furthermore, the display of bodily acts in 'Whim,' doggy-style in a public place, heated and comfortless, also evokes the classical cynicism of Diogenes the dog, and anticipates the linguistic dog-nailing and philosophical opprobrium in, for example,' Madoc' (*Mad*, 13–261) and 'A Collegelands Catechism' (MSG, 15). Exhausted and helplessly intertwined, the couple recalls the vulnerability of the hedgehog and the many mule motifs of the previous collections as their uncertain end reflects upon the fate of human and aesthetic and linguistic whims. Unions of larger proportions are also encapsulated in this deadlock. However, cultural cross-fertilisation, formal regeneration and linguistic dissemination have proven vital to the durability of Muldoon's poetic language. Muldoon's language in 'Whim,' as Byron's in 'Beppo,' suits the caprice of the couple, bears upon the mystery of Brownlee and is suffused with the contradictoriness of Belfast at the time.

'October 1950,' just like 'Whim,' presents another alterrative. 'Whim' offers startling alternatives of human language and intercourse. 'October 1950,' a date which most likely marks the conception of the author himself, meditates on the chanciness of procreation, life and language. Certainly a poem on origins, whether those of Muldoon's, Brownlee's or anybody else's, or those of the poem itself and of language, these verses thwart the expected ordinary course of such a quest. The moment of conception cannot be fixed and yields no elucidations, it merely exists as another point of obfuscation and randomness to questions of origin and identity. The poem ends:

> Whatever it is, it goes back to this night,
> To a chance remark
> In a room at the top of the stairs;
> To an open field, as like as not,

> Under the little stars.
> Whatever it is, it leaves me in the dark. (9)

Uncertainties about the alternative places of conception situate the coming into being between the mundane and the divine in a similar manner to 'Mules.' Conceived in the confines of prosaic domesticity or resulting from a more romantic outdoor liaison, any metaphysical governance, in the form of celestial stars, is deprived of illuminating influence. Questions of birth, identity and fate depend as much on chance and contingency as plan and providence. Part of the poem's boldness is contained in the separation of identity formation from divine design, national paradigms and parental aspirations. Most ostentatiously, such a vision points to a detachment from the directives of religion, country and family, but as these defining factors are already rendered precarious, the individual life becomes an emergent process in which the premises of choice are not always clear. Thus, each decision in life can confirm as well as oppose the formative influences that weigh upon the individual, a permanent state of uncertainty that in itself calls for careful consideration rather than conviction and foreclosure. This copulative stage, before and beyond conception, a possible pre-individual event of formative significance, is resonant with moments of waste or potential life – 'unremembering darkness, an unsteady hold,' as the next poem states (10). But this poem on the haphazardness of origins also activates its own precarious literary genealogy and poses questions of linguistic derivation.

> Whatever it is, it all comes down to this;
> My father's cock
> Between my mother's thighs.
> Might he have forgotten to wind the clock? (9)

A truly corporeal moment of conception, these explicit lines are denuded of the shocking contraceptive delight, fear of censure and envy of Larkin's 'High Windows' and the clock-allusion to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* implicates the procreative moment in endless lines of familial ancestry and in the complexities of narration of that eighteenth-century novel. The arbitrary question speculates on the timing of sex and daily duties, and refers to the fate of Michael O'Rahilly and Yeats's celebratory poem: "Because I helped to wind the clock / I come to hear it strike."[16] Leaving his wife and three children behind as the only

16 Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 354.

leader of the Easter 1916 Rebellion to die in action, O'Rahilly felt honour-bound to participate in the rising he supported, but whose timing he opposed. Muldoon's line harbours the possibility of not being conceived in October 1950, or at all, if his father had been otherwise engaged at the time, or dedicated to political action. The verses, thus, imagine the non-birth of the persona, not merely the alternative directions his life might have taken.

Parentage, biological and literary, appears capricious and at the mercy of chance in 'October 1950;' the poem also hints at an alternative existence, even non-existence. Thus, it implies Muldoon's way with language, too. Etymological quest, so important to *dinnseanchas* for example, frequently bears less importance to Muldoon's poetic language than the routes of false or fanciful etymologies, the lines of linguistic licence, the fields of phonetic fantasy and the seas of semiosis – 'anything wild and wonderful' (9) as the poem runs. Such a farewell to the roots and restrictions of language in this poem and in the many departures in *Why Brownlee Left* indubitably announces the arrival of the yet unconceived and possibly non-existent life of the language to come in *Quoof*, the next volume, and the subsequent *Madoc*, *Annals of Chile* and *Hay*. 'October 1950' bristles, hedgehoglike, in theme, intertextuality and language with alternatives to conventional ideas of birth and beginnings, of literature and the poetic and of narrativity and happenstance.

If conception, birth and life are as much tied up with metaphysical mysteries as biological acts, the origins and functions of language are often predicated upon the transcendent. Religious directives manifest one such transcendent value. 'The Bishop' deals with the dilemmas of submitting to or absconding from such discourses. With premonitions of Brownlee's disappearance and of the godfather's quasi-absolution in the concluding 'Immram,' a priest's last minute decision to renege on his vocation uncannily fulfills his vocation:

> The night before he was to be ordained
> He packed a shirt and a safety razor
> And started out for the middle of nowhere,
> Back to the back of beyond,
>
> Where all was forgiven and forgotten,
> Or forgotten for a time. (14)

The clergyman absconds and exchanges the spiritual realm of sanctity and piety for an abstract and intangible place. Unloosening tetrameters and unrhymed sentences signal shifts from certainty to flux and the quotidian

paraphernalia conceal a menacing edge. The clichés also convey a lapse into the sublapsarian; the word is made colloquial. Family, friendship and prosperity fill the ecclesiastic's new life until a second peripeteia occurs:

His favourite grand-daughter
Would look out, one morning in January,
To find him in his armchair, in the yard.

It had snowed all night. There was a drift
As far as his chin, like an alb.
'Come in, my child. Come in, and bolt
The door behind you, for there's an awful draught.' (14)

The dramatic reversal of perspectives is buttressed by the relocation of point of view and by the change in poetic diction from description to a more enunciatory mode. Evidently, the retired minister has now also taken leave of his senses; he has reached a state of senility after a life of repletion, a commonplace conclusion to a natural life cycle. Conversely, repercussions of remorse for his act of apostasy have finally undermined his sanity. Almost seated on a throne, metaphorically dressed in pontificals and echoing Christ's words to the little children, the apostate finally finds himself close to the interior, the vestments and the supernatural solitude from which he once absconded. In many aspects, a twin brother to Joyce's Father Flynn, 'The Bishop' becomes another representative figure of the inescapable, ambivalent forces of religion. In the whiteness and frigidity of these verses, 'alb' appears astonishingly apposite. The contradistinction of this word for white-coloured ecclesiastic attire from the word for a summit of inclement climate – alp –depends solely on the minimal difference of that word's final sign – the voicing of the final utterance designates the textile insignia of religious service; the unvoiced variant connotes a remote place of cold, solitude and silence. Subtle, sublime and subliminal, 'alb' inflects the bishop's fate.

Conception, birth, religion: big questions about identity and destiny surround the central mystery of Brownlee's disappearance, always in a language that doubts, derails and differentiates itself, and that challenges incessantly its own procedures. It appears natural that the issues of nation and nationalism are also part of Brownlee's dilemma, as are the grand narratives of identity and belonging, identification and becoming. To treat such a grand theme of nation and nationalism in twenty-six-word, as 'Ireland' does, succeeds in paring down great ideas, not without irony and sarcasm, to a manageable format. Certainly, this minimalism includes an exquisite feat of language condensation in which

Muldoon often excels and posits the rhetorical question or challenge as to how much can you actually retain of large discourses in the minutest form?

> The Volkswagen parked in the gap,
> But gently ticking over.
> You wonder if it's lovers
> And not men hurrying back
> Across two fields and a river. (19)

The covert rhymes in this imagist mystery convey a clandestine atmosphere and the trimetrical tick-tack indicates triple valences and functions as an ominous count-down. Do the two incognitos have a deadline to meet and will they make it? Do they flee from a ticking bomb, from a jealous third partner, from the police or the army? Perhaps they are just friends in a fluster or lovers on a quick errand? A really worrying aspect of this poem is its disclosing of a place where love and terror cannot be easily distinguished. For whatever reasons the fugitives are running, although we don't know from whence they came or to where they go; as representatives of Ireland they present their nation via ideas of uncertainty, plurality, mobility and unknown identities. Thus, the disconcerting scene not only confirms Ireland as a place of constant terror, it also shatters principles of blinkered conviction and established identity processes and leaves several questions unanswered. These include: what nation do the fleeting figures actually represent? Is Ireland a place they escape from or to? Why?

Uneven terrain and natural obstacles in the poem, 'the gap, two fields and a river,' indicate that Ireland is not as much of a unity as the title indicates. Syntactically, this convolution between unity and division is rendered by clauses in the sentence with the poem's unconventional form suggesting that Ireland is not easily defined. The image of Ireland as a Volkswagen with an idling engine appears as an alternative to many ideological conception of nationhood. The Volkswagen is placed in a dip, possibly between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Muldoon's poem is also positioned between and beyond two blocs of thought and poetic representation. The radical impetus of the poem becomes even clearer when read in relation to Tom Clyde's assessment of poetry in Northern Ireland in the 1980s, and his prescriptions for the future:

> You will search in vain in recent volumes for anything which speaks to the contemporary statelet, the Ulster of both BMW and Volvo's busiest British dealers. … Perhaps one solution could be a rejection of romanticism, which is the ethos embraced most fervently on all sides, in

> favour of a new modernism with its traditional concerns for alienation, psychological realism and relativism adapted to our needs.[17]

Muldoon's poem attends to the relative status and juxtaposed complexities, of not only Northern Ireland but also Ireland, with an image that even steers away from the partitioned polarity of poetics and nations inherent in Clyde's assertion. As a popular means of transportation from German assembly lines, the import of the Volkswagen – a bug and a beetle in most poetic and political discourses – bustles with exactly the commerce, consumerism and modernism that Clyde sees as lacking in current accounts of the province. It captures the industrial production that Northern Ireland historically shared with German centres of industry, but ambivalently so, as the Volkswagen obviously comes with some contentious associations of conflict during the two world wars. Similarly, the Volkswagen evokes reminders of politico-ideological traffic between Ireland and Germany during the wars, and raises questions of economic in/dependence. Out of gear and with a low rate of revolutions, the static motor echoes pre-Celtic Tiger industrial unproductivity, a sense of stasis emphasised by the verbal passiveness of the poem's indolent first sentence. Ultimately, the Volkswagen overrides neo-Kantian idealism, one of the primary sources of Romanticism, in a symbolic updating of ideas and idiom. Muldoon's poem includes much of the alienation, realism and relativism of Clyde's critique, but these modernist maxims are placed on the borders of national discourses and indiscriminate internationalism. Although discourses of nationality, irredentism and loyalism – other reasons for Brownlee's fate – are registered in the poem, Muldoon's mechanical metaphor (which, by the bye, takes his enduring horse power for a technological ride), his defamiliarised form and his syntactic solutions render redundant the mythological reproduction of nationhood, anthropomorphic figuration and the binary poetics of organicism and modernism in much poetry at the time. 'Ireland,' in a single complex sentence, revs up conventional metaphors of the nation, overtakes romanticist traffic and crashes full force into larger discourses of ideological production. 'Ireland' is alterrative.

Some of the borders, divisions and demarcations implicit in 'Ireland' become explicit in 'The Boundary Commission.' The title, contentious in itself, refers to the 1921–25 border negotiations in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Civil War and the continuous reviewing of constituencies in Northern Ireland, with all the connotations of border campaigns,

17 Tom Clyde, 'An Ulster Twilight? Poetry in the North of Ireland,' *Krino*, no. 5 (1998), 100–101.

gerrymandering and sectarian slogans. Two quatrains with italicised and plain fonts add configurative clout and tension to this delineation of the negative outcomes of partition. The first three italicised lines, which connect the poem to the sense of randomness in the first italicised edition of *New Weather*, destabilises the poem's own discourse. This distinguishing of verses by graphic design inscribes the poem with internal borders and visualises a sense of separation. That only three of the lines in the first quatrain are separated by this technique induces a sense of manipulation and mismatch. Besides, italicised text feigns authority, suggests citation, indicates quotation, and places the poem between fact and fiction. In the poem, the border runs down the centre street of a village to place the butcher and the baker in separate states, an invisible barrier that also subjugates the course of nature:

> a shower of rain
>
> Had stopped so clearly across Golightly's lane
> It might have been a wall of glass
> That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
> To wonder which side, if any, he should be on. (15)

The syntactic continuance of the sentence across the stanzas suggests a sense of continuity and congruence across the divide caused by the border in close-knit communities. The stopping short of natural phenomena, such as the rain, reveals the preternatural division of the superimposed border, and conceptualises the many territorial, political, denominational, familial and psychological confrontations of border districts. Neutrality or a middle stance is no option. Any position of doubt and remonstration is subsumed by a totalizing binarism and the dispelling of these strictures seems to remain beyond individual control. Neither does any traffic or exchange between the two domains, if that is possible, seem to entail anything but futility: imagery of broken glass evokes breakage and destruction. Uncertainty, reflected in the plasticity of the third person pronouns; disintegration, seen in the second stanza's dissolution of the first stanza's half rhymes; and paralysis, captured by a series of clauses, are the outcome of this detrimental division. Some of this despair is alleviated by the sense of balance in the poem; it does not take sides. Division is made clear, but the binocularity of this border vision transcends sectarian insularity of two implacable domains in its balanced tone; even the balanced distribution of two quatrains ensures equilibrium. An unflinching will to non-commitment, despite its apparent impossibility, also serves to refure and surpass the present state. Such a conviction of impartiality pertains to the negotiations of poetic

positions too. In attitude and imagery 'The Boundary Commission,' another constraint upon Brownlee's situation, illustrates the apoliticality that Heaney criticises in Muldoon's poetry, and how this balance of oppositions is mediated by linguistic and syntactic strategies.[18]

Two portrayals of agrarian communities, tradition and nationhood, 'Early Warning' and 'Lull,' attend to rural life organised around the schism presented so forcefully in 'The Boundary Commission.' In this context, the two poems also echo the divisions of Heaney's 'The Other Side' in *Wintering Out*. 'Early Warning' juxtaposes the different reactions of two individuals to the warning on the wireless of apple-scab disease. The persona's father immediately sprays the apples; the other, 'our Protestant neighbour Billy Wetherall,' 'Would sling his hammock / Between two sturdy Grenadiers / And work through the latest Marvel comic' (16). In all its linguistic potency, the poem does not wince from using stereotypes whereby the Protestant dependence on military support is rendered colloquial ('grenadiers,' obsolete for pomegranate trees, rings with the colloquial term for the British Army's first regiment of household infantry) and Catholic belief in marvels is ridiculed. Yet the poem also goes against this grain of stereotyping: Protestant laziness undermines the Protestant work ethos as defined by Weber and any Catholic sense of divine design is countered by hard work and dependence on the rational remedy of insecticide.[19] Ominously, the title tends to be laden with other admonitions too, and the word 'lee' in the poem, 'in its modest lee' (16), implicates Brownlee in these borders of agricultural practise and discourses.

Its counterpiece, 'Lull,' corresponds to 'Early Warning' in its focus on temporality and an agrarian community with ingrained attitudes. The title word's alphabetic construction, syntactic undecidability and semantic duplicity contain, astoundingly, a fissured whole as the three ls embrace the u protectively in this biliteral unity. Stasis and activity, simultaneously, assert the word's status as both noun and verb. Idioms of nature – the lull before the storm, the

18 In his discussion of commitment and critique of deconstructive tendencies in 'The Prenatal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry,' Heaney upbraids Muldoon 'whose swerves away from any form of poker-faced solidarity with the political programs of the Northern Catholic minority (from which he hails) have kept him so much on his poetic toes that he has practically achieved the poetic equivalent of walking on air.' Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 52.

19 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1904–5] 1958). Weber's influential analysis has been disputed, but perhaps not entirely refuted. See also Thomas Mann's Nobel-winning novel *Buddenbrooks* (1924) which, in its critique of philistinism, also charts the decline of the aristocratic family through a dissociation of their capitalist business from a protestant ethic.

storm lulled – provide parallel association in a relaxation of vigilance or temporary pause in human activity. In form, this sonnet of smouldering tension suspends the traditional divisions of its own genre in the elision of turning point and in the continuance of theme throughout the verses. Remarkable dulcet assonance and mellifluous sibilants bestow peace and harmony and the evenly-balanced distribution of strong and weak rhymes adds symbolic equipoise. *Deibhidhe* effects strengthen Gaelic heritage, just as the colloquial idiom and relaxed metrics mirror the demotics and down to earth mentality of the Troubles: 'I've heard it argued in some quarters / That in Armagh…' (17). Northern Ireland is the obvious epicentre and 'Armagh' links this poem to the previous apocalyptic 'Armageddon, Armageddon.' Beautiful and beguiling, the Home counties, Christmas, familiar gospel and the comfort of the hearth exude a benevolent atmosphere of everyday pleasantness. Its stanzaic division of four semantic fields hints of a larger Irish dimension, as much as the tercets suggest internal trilateral relations: Holy Trinity, Ireland – Northern-Ireland – England, Dantean verse form. The poem, however, starts with a line of dispute and veiled divisions in one of the most contested counties during the Troubles: 'I've heard it argued in some quarters / That in Armagh they mow the hay / With only one week to go to Christmas' (17). The apparently carefree rhetoric conceals a potential drastic turn to diehard and long-term devotional perspectives: 'Tomorrow is another day' (17). A smouldering sense of fomenting unrest underlies the apparent tranquility of the domestic scene and the seasonal peace its tranquility seems to represent: 'There are still houses where the fire / Hasn't gone out in a century' (17). Keeping the fire lit in a safe house while wintering in symbolises luminously the nurturing of patriotic passion in anticipation of a better season for outdoor work and agitation, more grimly understood to include arson and incitement to violence – an intermittent cessation of action called by the title and reinforced by the final three lines' lacunae of timelessness and lassitude: 'I know that eternal interim; / I think I know what they are waiting for / In Tyrone, Fermanagh, Down and Antrim' (17). Written at a time of failed ceasefires and political stalemate, the poem records contemporary deadlock, but also harks back to centuries of cyclical violence. The cynical evocation of the pernicious reality of the 'Lull' as a temporary ceasfire in a centuries-old conflict presents us with a grimly pessimistic recognition or concession to a view of the Anglo-Irish conflict as immutable and insoluble. Manmade conflict and spasmodic violence are seen as natural and inevitable phenomena. A critique can be construed from this portrayal of lackadaisical ineluctability. Both biblical millenarianism and political utopianism focus beyond the immediate matters and the incumbent reality of the existing order, and contribute ideologically to an endless deferral that only perpetuates the

inadequacies of the present impasse. Such a critique puts both sides of the divide under scrutiny and criticises them with equal force. A divided society in which both sides maintain a statics schismogenesis suggests other reasons for Brownlee's immersion or emigration. Titles, syntax and lineation in 'Early Warning' and 'Lull' articulate separate agrarian traditions, which also add motivation to Browlee's disappearance.

Powers of religion, nation, and bifurcated traditions mould the unfolding of self, as do the institutions and processes of education. In the ten half-rhymed couplets of 'The Geography Lesson,' the seasonal importation of goods from exotic corners of the world shadows the situation and possible futures of the pupils. Boxed in by the classroom, the children are 'small and wild // Against a map of the known world, / The back row of the class of '61. / Internal exiles at thirteen or fourteen' (10). The number of stanzas account for the pupils' (and Muldoon's) age and the couplets configure alternative lives and unacknowledged drives; the 'unremembering darkness, an unsteady hold' (10). Stanzaic transition and lineation, most strikingly the last verbless and full-stopped subordinate clause, impose isolation, stasis, and impasse upon the upcoming generation. In 'The Weepies' (11), the fascinating world of film provides (the same) young malleable minds with a medium of emotional self-enhancement. 'Cuba'(13) offers a lecture on moralism in its juxtaposition of 'the world at war' and juvenile courting. Laconic lessons of lewdness expand the curriculum vitae in 'Bran' (12). The most frightening lesson before Brownlee's disappearance, however, seems to be the one taught and learnt from 'Anseo.'

'Anseo' highlights the centrality of language in its very title. The word offers a linguistic alternative to English. It stirs incomprehension and mystery to non-Gaelic speakers and it offers the familiarity of the commonplace to those who understand the language. Its sense of secrecy and shibboleth gets to the heart of the matter. Gaelic for 'here and now / All present and correct' (20), the standard roll call for school attendance carries wider implications of duties and proprieties; questions of freedom and fate are inextricably interwoven, pronominally and personally. 'Anseo,' 'the first word of Irish I spoke' initiates the persona into another language, and another course of life. The call remains unanswered in the absence of Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward, an unexceptionally inauspicious name. 'Joseph, Mary and Jesus,' one might say, and somewhat cursed from the beginning, the name also evokes the fate of its namesake, Joseph Mary Plunkett, the Irish nationalist poet and leader of the 1916 Easter Rising who was afterwards executed. Ward, of course, also evokes numerous ideas of guardianship and custody and this heavily-allusive epithet, Joseph Mary Plunkett, literally initialises his own sado-masochistic self-assertion by engraving the letters of his name on the stick with which he is to be punished

for his absence. His formidable resistance to and endurance of the Prussian discipline and corporal punishment of the school system finally leads him to a reiteration of the same coercive structures as commandant of an IRA unit: 'His volunteers would call back *Anseo* / And raise their hands / As their names occurred' (21). Now answering to the name Joe Ward, the diminutive inscribes a departure from but also a reduction of personality. This sinister poem indicts totalitarian elements in education and liberation ideology, as the three stanzas reveal the inherently suppressive elements of an institution of enlightenment and a regiment of emancipatory idealism. However, the devotion to these pedagogic and patriotic orders by the schoolmaster and the 'Quartermaster' is copper-fastened by sonnet form. In view of these systems of draconian discipline and coercive strictures, the volume's elevation of whims and whimsicality make sense.[20]

In his pride, punishment and discipline, the protagonist's fated resistance also represents tendencies in hermeneutics and literary theory. If a poem is meant to answer back to external pressures and artistic demands, Joe Ward's upright confrontation and subsequent deviation mimic Muldoon's premeditated non-compliance and forging of his own, frequently controversial, poetic register and imaginative idiom. Ward's defection from school and his rise in rank reflect metaphorically Muldoon's resistance to and departure from the many schools of literary criticism to which he has been subjected, and the aspirations and anxieties he exerts upon new talents – a double stance familiar from 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' (*M*, 11–13). Simultaneously, in its double focus, the poem's observing persona hints of another Muldoon, the informed witness who withholds judgmental evaluation.

'Anseo' appears as the last pugnacious depiction of the many individual dispositions and public conditions that might have provoked Brownlee's disappearance and it brackets, together with 'Immrama,' his vanishing points of auto-asphyxiation or egregious emigration within two entirely Irish idioms. Sonnet form and a doubled sense of departure and arrival further connect this central triptych. If, up to this point, *Why Brownlee Left* reads as a combination of bildung poetics and Gramscian critique of cultural hegemony, the subsequent sequence indicates extraordinarily imaginative departures, frequently unresolved or verging on death – perhaps just another threshold – in a language which often unfolds from its own traditions and meaning. 'Immrama,' is such a poem.

20 Joseph Mary Plunkett appears again, alongside Oliver Cromwell, in 'The Firing Squad' (*OTTWK*, 81).

'Immrama,' Gaelic for voyages, alludes to the great travelogues across the seas to the Otherworld in Irish mythology. Its impetus is clearly linguistic and narrative. In form and idiom, the colloquial sonnet departs from the travel epic. Still, these verses trail, not the genealogy or biography, but the spirit of the persona's father, and opens out on truths that are told through narrative events that may not necessarily have taken place. The poem is a specimen alterrative in its integration of alterity into language, storytelling and thinking, and in its delineations of alternative life possibilities. The son's trailing of his vagrant father's spirit through somewhat familiar conditions of disease and deprivation ends at a building site from which his father bolted, only to reappear mysteriously in Brazil: 'That's him on the verandah, drinking rum / With a man who might be a Nazi, / His children asleep under the mosquito-nets' (23). This apparition gives a gloomy, historical twist to Brownlee's past and future. Whereas the persona imagines paternal death in 'The Waking Father' (*NW* 10), the questing child here conjures up another life and family of the father, perhaps at the cost of his own existence. Enmeshing the father in a milieu of German war criminals, the vision is almost surgically detached from familial sentiments and habitual affinities. Negative in all its aspects, the ability to develop alternative lives for your own parentage, or to postulate your own non-existence, creates a space for unlimited fantasy beyond the closures of (auto-) biography and history – a striking alterrative.

Just as 'Anseo' and 'Why Brownlee Left' reflect upon the positions of poetry and poet in their themes and language, 'Immrama' also dwells upon its own self-generative non-veracity by similar means. In the atmosphere of totalitarian ideology and alternative families, the first line in this sonnet, 'I, too, have trailed my father's spirit' (23), assumes all the anxiety of influence. This anxiety includes Muldoon's dedication 'for my Fathers and Mothers' in *New Weather*, his own previous father poem 'The Waking Father' in *New Weather* and the many more to come: 'Immram' in this volume, 'The Mirror,' 'My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers' and 'Cherish the Ladies' in *Quoof*; all of *Meeting the British* which is dedicated to his father; 'Third Epistle to Timothy' and 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' in *Hay*; 'Moryson's Fancy' in *Maggot* and 'Charles Émile Jacque: *Poultry Among Trees*' in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. Beyond this catalogue of commemoration, his palimpsests of paternity extend to what Kendall has so fittingly termed Muldoon's 'polycentric pedigree,'[21] which includes, of course, among others, '*Il Duce* of Drumcliff,' as Muldoon labels Yeats in 'Yarrow' (*AC*, 145), Joyce, Frost, MacNeice, Longley, Heaney, and the many bardic

21 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 33.

poets and anonymous authors of Gaelic *immrama* associated with this volume, to mention just the most obvious creative ancestry.

The quest for the father in 'Immrama' ends in Brazil. This is no accident. This destination reorients totally the ordinary routes of Irish emigration and it incorporates the mythic utopia of Gaelic folklore, Hy-Breasil. The inclusion of fantasy, in this case dark and disturbing, in the personal and the public spirit of the Irish Atlantis overlaps with Seán Hillen's spectacular *Irelantis*.[22] In Muldoon's poem, as in Hillen's hyperreal photo collages, fabulation is part of reality. These permutations and conflations anticipate 'Brazil' in *Annals of Chile*, and mark the true unreality of life – the unrestricted possibilities of what might have been and what might yet be – which can often best be imagined in poetic language. 'Immrama' speculates upon the spiritual pedigree and the unrealised lives of Brownlee, with all their metaphoric implications, by altering the compositions of traditional narrative and by tracing bilingualism. 'Immrama' alters Brownlee, *Why Brownlee Left*, the reader and much of the poetry and traditional ways of thinking at the time of its publication, and perhaps even today.

Adlinguistic language that explores its own etymology, syntax, grammar and poetic composition coalesces with the volume's mysteries of disappearance, origin and identity or, perhaps, rather, the dissolution of origins or the conceptualisations they entail. Like the tracing of a word's meaning that ends in spurious heritage and doubtful dissemination, quoof for example, and like the searching for stability in a structure that shifts continuously, the poems in this volume substitute ruptures and redoubling for fixity and presence, identification for identity and becoming for being in the questions of life and living, believing and belonging. However much such critical questioning of central principles of metaphysics now appears part of daily discourse, such inquiry into dominant structures of thinking still retains some of its radical force, and traces its own provocative power in communities in the 1980s when the unfolding of individual life was so strongly conceived in terms of undifferentiated ideologies, particularly in Northern Ireland.

'Promises, Promises,' like the tracing of a trail of smoke to its source in a smoky room while the cigarette disappears or is already gone, allows for a complex self who realises his own future by realigning it to a past that is split, spliced and spurious. Past and future possibilities fleet across the page in the contemplative confusion of 'Promises, Promises,' which sounds resigned, resigned in its laconic iteration of optimistic vows. In this sonnet triptych, a grass-inebriated persona in the tobacco-land of North Carolina – 'There is such

22 Seán Hillen, 'Irelantis,' (2000–2015), http://www.irelantis.com/, accessed 17 April 2019.

splendour in the grass / I might be the picture of happiness' (24) – indulges in reveries of reunion with an abandoned lover. Disappointments with grass and landscape, possibly reminiscences from elsewhere, bode ill for amorous fidelity and solemn engagements: 'Whatever is passing me by is passing me by' (24). In cadences that capture the ruptures and redoubling of a becoming self, two semi-repetitive sonnets are prised apart by a retrospective reminder, a poetic construction which configures formally a liminal state of doubt and double binds, and supplant any clear-cut choice of separation or reunion. The interpolated sonnet harks back to Raleigh's Roanoke settlement, the disappearance of which is still today a mystery, and the persona's oneiric identification with one of the early settlers – 'I am with Raleigh, near the Atlantic' – implies that he might be a descendant of the vanished colonists, in which case his own history cannot be tracked to origins, only traced to lost traces. The disappearance of the colony imbricates the lover's predicament in a larger fabric of conflict and failure – a familiar constellation in the volume and at this stage of Muldoon's oeuvre – but more importantly, enmeshes the absconder's situation in questions of ancestry and progeny. Intoxicating fumes and symbolic trails of smoke surround questions of origin: while the trails, if possible, are traced, the source disappears during the tracing, or was already lost a long time ago. If Raleigh's colony of men dispersed into the native population, as the verses intimate, the association bears the possibility that the lover will assimilate accordingly, and that the woman left behind in 'her room in Bayswater' (25) carries a woman's secret and might be pregnant without her partner's knowledge. Brownlee, if this is him and not somebody else – his father, Muldoon, an analogy for anybody, parts of all of us – has certainly ploughed some new fields, in a Byronic fashion, since he bolted on a whim from his own plot.

The verses trace and track their own lines, too. 'I am,' 'I am,' 'I am,' all three stanzas start, as an Oedipal and futile determination to establish identity and presence over flux and contingency. In phrasing and confused inbetweenness, the three stanzonnets resound with the melancholy of exilic fissure found in Yeats's 'I am of Ireland,' and beyond those verses, 'The Alphabet Calendar of Amergin,' the second poem of the supposedly first poet of Ireland. The paramnesic interlude reverts to the Renaissance history and literature of Sir Walter Raleigh. An account of the lost colony at Roanoke and of Raleigh's prison poem 'The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage,' from which Muldoon quotes three verses almost verbatim, exerts a complex English anxiety upon the poem, an ambivalent anxiety of Englishness that includes the American and the Whitmanesque, as the importance of grass makes clear. Written while on trial for treason pending beheading, the interpolation of Raleigh's lines entangles Muldoon's verses with differentiated views of the colonial conquest and

plantation policies of Ireland by England during the Renaissance. In this poetic context, and contest, Muldoon's poem redoubles Heaney's recourse to Raleigh's life and lines in 'Ocean's Love to Ireland' in *North*, another poetic triumvirate. Where Heaney, in that poem, surrenders problems of individual identity to concepts of nation, and re-enacts Raleigh's poetics and politics for overt corroboration of stereotypical ideas of colonial rape and violent suppression of people, land and language, Muldoon confronts this idiom with continental displacement, multiple literary lineage and insoluble questions of identity. In Muldoon's own work, these traces disappear and reappear and mysteries of the failed colony become central to the many secrets, riddles and unresolved projects in *Madoc*. 'Promises, Promises' integrates aspects of anteriority and alternatives in varying scenarios of what might have been and counter-factual becomings.

The adlinguisticism, intertextuality and alterratives of lost love and lost origins on the American continent in 'Promises, Promises' mirror the mystery of Brownlee's disappearance, and anticipate themes of exit and entombment in verses to come. A succession of seven love poems, as desolate and desultory as the first 'Whim,' follows. Detached, deviant and distanced, these intersecting love poems – 'Truce,' 'History,' 'Palm Sunday,' 'The Avenue,' 'Something of a Departure,' 'Holy Thursday,' 'Making the Move' – are encoded in the grander narratives of religion, war and history by reciprocal recursivity. Each of the titles designated to serve as a heading to the poem and love theme of the individual poems is itself partly or wholly derived from the thematic contortions to be developed in those very poems. Thus, the titles result as much from the poems as the poems from the titles; the verses define anew the grand terms from which they derive: 'Truce' becomes as chancy and fickle as a one-night stand, and 'History' as personal as sex; 'Palm Sunday' is defined by ordinary days of historical warfare and everyday violence as much the celebrations of Passover; 'Avenue' is mapped on temporal and emotional distance; 'Departure' depends on deviancy and deliverance; 'Holy Thursday' results from a solitary restaurant interlude. Definitions do not depend on what they define, nor does what is being defined depend only upon their definitions; this linguistic redoubling questions how these particular formations of meaning have erased their own coming into being. Such linguistic rupturing bears heavily down upon processes of identity formation by recovering the absent and ignored, by revealing the alterior and the alternative, and by releasing the energies of dissemination. Motions and mutations of this kind require and result from 'Making the Move,' the final recursion in this series of lovely linguistic variations. Certainly, this title anticipates the themes of separation and departure, of emotional flux and future uncertainties, but the inconstancy which moves in the syntactical slide

of subjects and the vacillation of verbal tense and mood in these verses – all the linguistic features of these lyrical lines which Eamon Grennan dwells on and defines as a masterful characteristic of Muldoon's work – preconditions its own title and delivers the recursivity of the previous poems.[23] The poem's title and ten reverberative couplets connect these lines with 'The Geography Lesson,' while the prevailing spirit of Homer's *Odyssey* slots into the unsettling language of the book . The poem also traces the volume's literary lines 'Past bad Lord Byron, Raymond Chandler, / *Howard Hughes; The Hidden Years*' (32). In a language defined by the problems of love and separation it depicts, this series relates to the possible backdrop of Brownlee's disappearance, as much as the subsequent sequence relates to his possible internment. Language, like love and history, is a battlefield where alternatives always vie for position.

'Were I embarking,' the final line of 'Making the Move' starts, with all the irresolutions of the conditional and the conjunctive. It rings with the stasis and the sense of internment that also surround the mysteries of Brownlee, and the themes of the book. Stifling forces stalk the volume as much as drives of escape and release in a language that creates these dilemmas, and is recreated by them. A cluster of three poems weighs in on the bleakness of death and disintegration. The importance Muldoon assigns to liminality, death and Joyce's 'The Dead' in *To Ireland, I* governs these desolate figurations and they appear as ultimate termini beyond further dissolution, and functions also as memento mori. Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* also seems to reign over these subterranean conversations. 'A frenzy of maggots / Make short work of so much blood and guts' (34) in the grotesqueries of 'Grief.' And these three poems are entirely self-absorbed; they would have little life without the many texts, titles and genres which they lean against. 'Come into my Parlour' offers a spectrum of ancestral intertextual voices. Connected to the Victorian nursery rhyme and to Heaney's replay of the Republican song in 'Come to the Bower' in *North*, Muldoon's poem counteracts the reverence of Victorian children's rhymes and the stance of Heaney's poem, and aligns itself, with Gothic grimness and Hamletian humour, to Grey's eulogy for the unremembered dead, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.' The third poem in this churchyard suite, 'The Princess and the Pea,' shrieks with haunted voices resonant with a vital adlinguisticism.

'Who is that on my grave?' an anonymous poet of the dispossessed asks in his dialogue of the living and the dead and Muldoon responds grimly, with echoes of Yeats's Crazy Jane, – 'All find safety in the tomb' – in his horrific

23 Eamonn Grennan, 'Two-Part Invention: Reading into Durcan and Muldoon,' in *New Irish Writing*, ed. James D. Brophy and Eamonn Grennan (Boston: Iona College Press, 1989), 203–232.

subterranean admixture of fairy tale and romance.[24] No fairy tale, 'The Princess and the Pea' is rather a gruesome picture of claustrophobia and a paranoiac projection of jealousy. The zestful keen of promiscuous infidelities renders palpable a horrific funeral of the dead and the living, with forceful feminine volition:

> This is the dream of her older sister,
> Who is stretched on the open grave
> Of all the men she has known.
> Far down, something niggles. The stir
> Of someone still alive.
> Then a cry, far down. It is your own. (33)

As the first line of both this and the first stanza makes clear, this is not an *aisling* in which the *spéirbhean* – the sky woman and traditional female representation of Ireland since the poems of the dispossessed – bemoans its fallen status to the poet; this is a different lament by an older relative. This bereavement concerns dead lovers, not dispossessed poets and planters. The poem pits the erotic against the platonic, the personal against the political, the bereft against the unsettled. Any sacrificial myth of the numinous motherland, Frazerian, Heneayesque or other, is occluded, but the poem maintains its energies by intertextual reference within the Muldoon canon. Its gothic elements recall the agoraphobic refugee of 'Vampire' in *New Weather*, point forward to paternal commemoration in 'The Mirror' in the following *Quoof*, and, of course, insert another installment in this volume's mystery: Brownlee might be one of the corpses in the grave. Whoever the dead and the living might be, the graveyard image illustrates most graphically canonical suffocation of the individual talent. The stifling burden of deceased poets upon the living writer severs him from his mundane muse and the life of the world above, and threatens to asphyxiate him. Conversely, the macabre situation illustrates how the artistic gestures of a vigorous new poet alter the positions of the predecessors who weigh him down, and how he inserts new life into dead language. Dislocated, the cry from below could also be the woman's; parts of her were buried with her beloved. The woman's desperate embrace of passed loves also evokes the painful liberation of contemporary female poets – Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuillenaín, Paula Meehan – from their patriarchal tradition, or Edna Longley's protest against the misogynist

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24 Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, eds., *An Duanare 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1981), 313.

burial of women poets, women editors, feminine attitudes and female perspectives in Deane's *Field Day Anthology*.[25] The dispassionate final twist – 'It is your own' – ensures that no reader of these lines escapes their pallid embrace. Nor does the poem escape the symbolic weight and phonetic possibilities of its own title.

A streaming of royal candidates according to their hypersensitivity, as in the fairy tale to which the title refers, is transposed easily to a selection of artistic superiority on the basis of an exquisite sensibility. There is contention here, between the two sisters, and between all the double divisions in the poem: the title's bifurcation, the two stanzas, the younger and the older sister, romance and reality, the living and the dead, views from the top and the bottom in the grave. The title's paradoxical combination of human nobility in the guise of the princess and 'the low' or everyday produce, the pea, contains a literal figuration of commendable idiomatic solemnity versus much condemned semiotic freeplay. Connected by the alliterative ps, a regal and predominantly monological word is juxtaposed with a polymorphic one. Peas and pi, two phonetic siblings, bring in associations of infinity that suit this poem on death and posterity. Pea, an obsolete exclamation of contempt – pooh – also sounds akin to the act of urination to suggest a latent paroxysm of hatred and contempt; to piss on the grave of everything passed. Pea is also a regional American term for the sliding weight of a safety-valve; Muldoon minds his Ps and Qs. The dehiscent word itself, like the two sisters, and the poem's many doubles as well as the frequent minimal differences in Muldoon's poetry, are not as like as two peas. They are pees in the terminological sense of mining and currency, the portion common to two intersecting veins, or the decimal values in a larger system of currency flows. The many lives of the pea in 'The Princess and the Pea,' alongside the intertextual vitality of these death poems, are ablaze with all the hermeneutic wildfire that Muldoon's poetic language so often engenders.

Muldoon's poetic language is never straightforward: it combines and defers, it dissolves and dissimulates, it always exists upon its own text and context. 'I Remember Sir Alfred' displays these qualities, and maps the conscious composition of creative writing. The reference made in the title to the great construction and road building company raises high entrepreneurial invention, engineering and industry to the plane of metaphor for poetic artifice and the building of creative edifices. Road-building suggests a turn away from organicist models of poetic creativity; the poem suggests mathematical calculation, methodological application and industrial production as an alternative way of thinking poetry. Yet the lines are confused by the 'singleminded swervings'

25 Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 22–44.

(18) of Sir Alfred's dislodged hare. Although these verses pave the way for the Volkswagen in 'Ireland' and the many commemorations of Irish navvies in *Moy Sand and Gravel*, their 'swervings' cannot be easily contained by the scientific imagery of the poem. Title and hare link the poem to Yeats's 'Memory' and associations of road construction swerve to Frost's 'The Road not Taken,' whereas the nonlinear and unpredictable 'leaps and bounds' (18) of the hare enact Irish whimsicality and Byronic whims: Bloomian ideas of anxiety underlie lines and swervings.

Swervings, lineal constructions, intertextual byroads and linguistic detours – all of these alternatives to the straight and the narrow revolve themselves in the solemn hilarity of the final tour-de-force, 'Immram.' This poem, like the earlier 'Immrama,' references and redoubles the topography of quest literature. Quest literature offers a pertinent point of departure for the poem's and the volume's critical engagement with prevailing ideas of origins, ancestry and identity, both in a personal and poetic sense, and in the many interrelations between them. In itself a fabulous journey of departures, the impulsive quest for origins in an American metropolis proposes a way out of the sexual stalemate in Belfast's Botanic Gardens in the opening, a twinning of the previous 'Immrama,' and a possible solution to the riddle of Brownlee's disappearance. Parts of the poem's many dis-courses can be traced to the opening 'Whim.' That title and poem point to the caprice of the volume, a possible reason for Brownlee's abrupt departure, and to the whimsies of 'Immram.' Whims and wonders of unimaginable ingenuity subsume the volume's aberrant voices and visions, and are ghosted by textual precursors. The poem's discursivity and its speed on the highways of literary traffic also connects it to the impulse of the initial 'Whim':

> In Beppo (1818) we see Byron at his brilliant best – witty, wise, at one moment stepping on the gas and cruising along the narrative equivalent of a six-lane highway, at the next content to pull over and make a leisurely digression down some back road or blind alley.[26]

Muldoon's description of the narrative propulsion and relaxed whimsicalities in his favourite poem by Byron also seems to set the place and pace of his own capricious night drive:

> They came bearing down on me out of nowhere.
> A Buick and a Chevrolet.

26 Muldoon, *The Essential Byron*, 5.

> They were heading towards a grand slam.
> Salami on rye. I was the salami.
> So much for my faith in human nature.
> The age of chivalry how are you? (40)

Compressed into a cliché of culinary rawness, the protagonist's position reflects the pressures of idiomatic alternatives, literary predecessors and views of humanity congruent with the author's quest to stake out his own poetic course: 'Immram,' the Gaelic word for voyage, appears as another of Muldoon's subjective correlatives. The pluritextual permutations of Muldoon's mock mini-epic take much of their initial impulse from the old Irish travel myth, *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* (*Voyage of Máel Dúin's Boat*), composed from the many scriptural fragments dating from the eight century onwards, and also known from Tennyson's poem and MacNeice's 1962 radio play, *The Mad Islands*. *Mael Dúin* means 'bald head,' and these patrilineal lines in *Why Brownlee Left* pit hirsute Muldoon against the ancient scribes, against his previous poetic identities, against past and contemporary poetics. In the old version, the hero – Máel Duín, the son of a violent union of a marauding Aran sailor warrior and a nun who was fostered by the nun's sister queen – embarks on a sea journey to avenge the murder of his father. After transgressing the *geis*, the taboo upon him, he is doomed to oceanic vicissitudes and adventurous island episodes, during which he undergoes spiritual transformation and finally achieves reconciliation with his father's murderers. The violations of taboos by the exilic son of complex origin lead to peace and reconciliation. Muldoon's aesthetic self-identifications are persuasive and plural. An original and powerful aside to the circuits of violence and vengeance in Northern Ireland, and their underlying ideas of origin, ancestry and identity, the poem also demonstrates the creativity of Muldoon's poetic language.

In Muldoon's 'Immram,' the persona is situated in the sordid conditions of urban slums and seedy entertainment venues beyond the boundaries of suburban respectability, just as his outlandish text departs from familiar textual grounds and redefines literary pedigree:

> I was fairly and squarely behind the eight
> That morning in Foster's pool-hall
> When it came to me out of the blue
> In the shape of a sixteen-ounce billiard cue
> That lent what he said some little weight.
> 'Your old man was an ass-hole.
> That makes an ass-hole out of you.'

My grand-father hailed from New York State.
My grand-mother was part Cree.
This must be some new strain in my pedigree. (38)

This early morning fisticuffs suggest a new encounter with Muldoon's previous poetry, Celtic heritage, classical genealogy and ancestral inheritance, just as the succeeding narrative series of para-byronic stanzas reveals a humorous play on the quest for home, family and origin. *In medias res*, the persona is firmly placed at the back of the black having indulged in a proverbial quantity of pints in an ambience that recalls the pool rooms, clubs, licensed premises and the mixed marriages in *Mules*. 'Foster's pool-hall' catches the triple dilemmas of surrogation, genetic attributes (of the gene pool) and environment, not to mention a popular Australian beer, which all feature in this circuitous and unresolved quest. It also hosts the play with textual forefathers, for example 'bad Lord Byron, Raymond Chandler, Howard Hughes: The Hidden Years' (32), listed in 'Making the Move.' Similarly, the stanzaic revelation stems not from a celestial source, but from the hard facts of verbal statements and corporeal enforcement. The hard-hitting facts in the billiard bar precipitate the persona's quest for his father, but the Foster fosterling's father 'could have been almost anyone.' Never to be found, he was most likely a drugs mule, perhaps on the run or murdered in Argentina or Brazil. The encounter with the top man of the crime pyramid, a Howard Hughes-like troglodyte, provides an absurd conciliation but no dénouement:

'I forgive you,' he croaked. 'And I forget.
On your way out, you can tell that bastard
To bring me a dish of ice-cream.
I want Baskin-Robbins banana-nut ice cream.' (47)

By absolving the visitor for the disappearance of his father – a disappearance he is probably responsible for himself – the nebulous and semi-imbecile godfather confers crime upon the questing son and implicates him in insoluble mystery.

The problematic quest for individual origins also involves foundation myths and communal identification. A police man at the NYPD recounts:

'My father, God rest him, he held this theory
That the Irish, the American Irish,
Were really the thirteenth tribe,
The Israelites of Europe.

> All along, my father believed in fairies
> But he might as well have been Jewish.'
> His laugh was a slight hiccup.
> I guessed that Lieutenant Brendan O'Leary's
> Grand-mother's pee was green,
> And that was why she had to leave old Skibbereen. (44)

The Chandleresque journey of intoxication, violent encounters and Byronic excess challenges romantic ideas of the Irish diaspora in America by means of Yeatsian quips and venereal bawdiness, while also questioning myths of biblical descent at home. Later in the poem, the narrator leaves the hotel lobby after Mrs. and Mr. Alfred Tennyson, whose exit makes manifest the many waking fathers and mothers in the poem – a celebration of artistic ancestry that also extends to the Queen's University Belfast critic and academic, Michael Allen, to whom the volume is dedicated. The Telemachian search for a father and for origins descends into an wayward and compulsive journey that arrives at its very point of departure. Finally, the son makes his way back, 'like any other pilgrim to Main Street, to Foster's pool-room' (47). Circular and disorientating, the tracing of his father's tracks sends the poem's protagonist back to the beginning, but in the course of the journey a welter of possible fathers and mothers with whom the foundling can identify have been presented.

The poetic language deployed in this quest for origins is contiguous with its numerous deferrals, doublings and dissimulations. Expansive intertextuality discloses lines of familiarity that cannot easily be categorised or terminated. A process of interwoven contingencies and continuities that fosters new lines and identifications unfolds itself. Other linguistic strategies strengthen these transformations. Italicisation, for example, that marvellous trick of the tale in the first edition of *New Weather*, presents a technique for marking on the linguistic body its own traces. '*Shall We Gather at the River*' and '*Bringing in the Sheaves*' (38) reference two traditional hymns in the textual whirligig; '*The Lord is my surf-board. I shall not want*' (45) substitutes Psalm 23's supplication with Beach Boy californication; '*The Way Of The One Wave*' arrives at an unreferenced title. This chain of iteration suggests, not without irony, how even religious discourse contains its own force of change and transformation. And that such language may have an aetiology that is just as whimisical.

'I am telling this exactly as it happened' (38), a snide sentence declares, with claims on truth and representation. Yes, this is the way it all takes place – in the poem; and this poem is part of the real. However much poetic language distinguishes itself from other types of language, it belongs to the real world, no matter how marginal its position might be therein. Self-reflexively though, the

remark points to the problems of narratology, to how the story is narrated more than to why it is narrated and to what it narrates, but most of all to the non-representational closure of much narratology. Such structuralist structures are splintered from within in 'Immram' by this type of multidiscursive narrativity which points ahead to the multidiscursive 'The More a Man Has The More A Man Wants' in *Quoof*, to *Madoc* and to 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' in *Hay*. Narrative complexity is also reiterated through the poem's cross-generic energies, italicisation and fictional references, and in the sliding semantics of its language. Beyond the poem itself, the narratological strategies of this recursive poetry illuminate previous poems and anticipate later ones. Its Gaelic title is germane to the discussions of Gaelic translations in the foreplay of 'Whim,' a title which is endowed with broader resonance by the whimsicalities of the final poem. Just possibly, the protagonist of the final poem is engendered by the first poem's procreative gambit. 'Immram,' singular for journey, connects with its plural prelude, 'Immrama.' Its textual allusions to previous poems and volumes, as well as anticipations of those to come, are too numerous to mention here. As a redoubling of previous poems, 'Imramm' mimics and reconfigures its own structures and concerns. The initial twenty-seven poem series starts and ends in the Botanic Gardens in Belfast, a structure which is replayed with a variation in the circularity of the final poem embarking from and arriving at 'Foster's pool-hall,' the first and last word of the thirty stanzas. This circular odyssey in the literally double-spaced 'Ithaca, New York' (45) adds significance, presence and detail to the void, absence and disappearance of the mystery at the centre of the book, 'Why Brownlee Left.' The final poem of the book 'Imramm' replays, recentres and redistributes many of the traces of the book. Funny and fascinating, these narrational strategies and deeds of poetic derring-do subscribe to Muldoon's belief 'that poetry can be serious without being solemn, that it might even be fun,' and add up to a counter-discourse in poetics and politics and in other spheres.[27] *Why Brownlee Left* dares to rethink the originary and self-identifical and to give credence to such a reconsideration of origins, as being not merely a lamentable loss. This serio-ludic poetics also engages with profound issues of identitarian politics and teleological thinking. Imaginative realisations of self, in a language and form that unhinge themselves, suggest possibilities for the individual to imagine for her- or himself an alternative form of self-realisation untrammelled by the habitual factors of origin, ancestry, history and closed systems of thinking.

The poetic language of *Why Brownlee Left* brings in its train a number of events upon which parts of the language by which these events unfold is

27 Muldoon, *The Essential Byron*, 5.

predicated. It is a language in which Muldoon appears and disappears as a subject, both a personal and a poetic one. The splitting and splicing of literary sources in a language that incessantly retraces itself allows for an irreducibly complex locomotion to be played out. In the absence of a full appreciation of these strategies, the mystery of the volume cannot be fully understood, nor can a critical account of the multiple alterratives of *Why Brownlee Left* be given.

CHAPTER 4

Quoof

Quoof presents in the very unintelligibility of its title the importance of language in Muldoon's fourth volume of poetry. In an entirely unprecedented constellation of letters, this queer word flaunts its own alterities and suggestiveness. It is a quip that traces its own coming into being back to the originary, the decentered and the unidentifiable, to an endless referral of new traces from which new meanings may emerge. It presents *adlinguisticism*. Absence, play and emptiness appear part and parcel of its very quiddity. Due to, more than despite of, its denial of definitions and a logical or linear heritage, this semiotic specimen takes on aural and semantic currency. The language of *Quoof*, which differs considerably from ordinary usage, critical expectations and public vocabulary, can be said to extend to larger discourses, too. Contemporary poetics, Heaney's in particular but also Kinsella's, Montague's and Mahon's, remains a target for parts of Muldoon's abrasive and dialogic poetics. Poetic form, especially the sonnet, becomes a space to be undermined from within and overwritten from without – a form Muldoon literally executes; he keeps it alive by risking its extinction. His narrative vein, which runs from his early verses to the Byronic whimsicalities of *Why Brownlee Left*, increasingly undermines the established standards of narratology. In relation to the concurrent chaos of its immediate contexts, for example the 1981 Hunger Strike in the Maze, the volume's illinguisticity, narratricidal structures and flirtations with the incredible help to engender its distinctively skewed semiosis. Not surprisingly, the baffling and bewildering dimensions of *Quoof* did not pass unnoticed among critics.

In the review where Derek Mahon questions the language of *Quoof* – 'Quaat?' – he proceeds to praise 'Muldoon's exchanges of opacity for opacity' in verses he deems 'peculiarly resistant to paraphrase' and 'opaque to the point of secretiveness.'[1] Mahon is not alone in his complimentary puzzlement. The reviewing of *Quoof* certainly suggests a type of poetic language which engenders heterogeneity and signifies by other means, and which puzzles and provokes. Edna Longley admits to the poet's countering of the language of commonalities: 'Paul Muldoon's poetry carries its own antibodies against literal-minded critics.'[2] 'Her title, 'Uncovering the Deadly Depths,' illuminates the seriousness

1 Derek Mahon, 'Quaat?,' *New Statesman* (11 November 1983), 27–28.
2 Edna Longley, 'Uncovering the Deadly Depths,' *Fortnight*, no. 200 (1983), 31.

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of Muldoon's narrathanatographies in particular, but also the adlinguistic and alterrative aspects of his poetry. Other writers also testify to the unintelligible character of his work. John Banville concedes: 'Muldoon's poetry is hard to grasp,' seeing a connection with beastliness and apocalypse in Yeats in a review headed 'Slouching toward Bethlehem.'[3] 'The argot of *Quoof* is foppish and odd,' John Kerrigan writes in 'The New Narrative.'[4] He understands Muldoon's alterratives far better. The unprecedented nature of Muldoon's poetic language also energises much of Aiden Mathews' review, 'Coiner of Words,' which praises the volume for 'the rich instability of words' and 'its language in heat.'[5] Peter Porter, in 'Redskins in Belfast,' describes the poems as 'compressed and cryptic' but confesses: 'In many of these, one wonders what is going on.'[6] Geoffrey Stokes assesses in 'Bloody Beautiful' the language as 'multilayered, kaleidoscopic,' 'full of small, precise, surprises' and 'verbal felicities,' and he argues: 'Muldoon is shifting, allusive, and sometimes downright baffling, but he is never insistent.'[7] With a headline capturing the volume's incongruent tonalities of levity and brutality, Martin Dodsworth finds in 'Lightly on the Raw' that the poems in this 'awkward but absorbing book' 'induce a nagging blankness by refusing to say what they're up to,' and that 'this is an art that disdains "art": not everyone will like it.'[8] Dillon Johnston finds the volume, apart from some of Kinsella's later volumes, the only one 'we could honestly label avant garde,' finding the language 'to be droll or coy but always carefully and delicately constructed,' and indicating a preference for the 'Protean experiences of his poems, often unpleasant' when compared 'to the tired shibboleths and false truths they replace.'[9] Johnston's latter assessment concurs with Muldoon's own comment on the transmogrifying mêlée of the last long poem: 'In "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants" I hoped to purge myself of the very public vocabulary it employs, the kennings of the hourly news bulletin.'[10] *Quoof*, in its title-word, certainly succeeds in this purgation, as do so many of the other estranging linguistic strategies in the volume that challenge its reviewers and critics. Basically all critics notice the shock and spectrality of Muldoon's language in *Quoof*,

3 John Banville, 'Slouching toward Bethlehem,' *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1991, 38.
4 John Kerrigan, 'The New Narrative,' *London Review of Books*, 16–29 February 1984, 23.
5 Aiden Mathews, 'Coiner of Words,' *The Irish Times*, 24 March 1992, 13.
6 Peter Porter, 'Redskins in Belfast,' *The Observer Review of Books*, 16 October 1983, 33.
7 Geoffrey Stokes, 'Bloody Beautiful,' *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, March 1984, 15.
8 Martin Dodsworth, 'Lightly on the Raw,' *The Guardian*, 17 November 1983, 17.
9 Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 263–272.
10 Paul Muldoon, 'Paul Muldoon Writes,' *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, no. 118 (1983), 1–2.

but very few of them, if any, explore the hermeneutic possibilities of his adlinguisticism and alterratives.

Despite the piecemeal insights of their evaluations, these critics testify unanimously to a perplexity in the language of *Quoof* that resists the ordinary apparatus of analytical approaches. A paradigmatic shift in critical thinking can be detected here. The catalogue of professed confusion from diverse reviewers reveals that the experimental and evasive qualities of the texts in this volume defy comprehension by means of conventional critical hermeneutics. One may surmise that one reason for the critical resistence of the poems to readymade interpretations stems from the ways in which *Quoof* explodes Romanticist concepts of love, language and pastoralism. Another factor in this hermeneutic bafflement, one may suggest, is how *Quoof* is situated at the nexus of modernist and postmodernist transition and transformation. If 'genuine poetry communicates before it is understood,' as Eliot claims, the unintelligibility of 'quoof' takes on added significance.[11] A third and very likely factor lies in Muldoon's language, notably its *unheimlich* lexicon, its formal inspections, its deformation of standard syntax and grammar and its experiments with linguistic concepts and philosophy. Its undecidability can cause confusion, curiosity and contrivance. It can provoke anger, aggression and resignation. *Quoof* makes manifest a very forceful example of *ostranenie*. But the word, the poem and the volume are also brimming with other possibilities. Perhaps, 'quoof' is not to be read, but rather 'looked at and listened to,' as Beckett advised readers to do when approaching Joyce's 'Work in Progress,' which became *Finnegans Wake*?[12] What notes might it sound? Or does Muldoon's letter cluster assume meaning by alphabetic supplementarity and alliterative association with queen, queer, quaff and quote to hoof, hoop, hoot and huff and the myriad of mutations before, between and beyond these possibilities? Is it an acronym? Does not the single letter, at any rate, assume specific significance in such an alphabetic stumbling block? If 'quoof,' in the language of deconstruction and semiotics, acts as an empty signifier awaiting the signified and as a floating signifier in the sea of signifiance, to what extent does it appropriate meaning from, and assign meaning to, the contexts of the volume with its eponymous poem 'Quoof'? With these far-reaching demands, which stretch the boundaries of poetic licence, and which constitute a challenge to literary critics and

11 Frank Kermode, ed. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 206.

12 Samuel Beckett, 'Dante. Bruno. Vico. Joyce.,' in *Finnegans Wake: A Symposium – Exagmination Round His Incamination of Work in Progress* (New York: New Directions, [1929] 1972), 11.

even the theoretical discourses of critical analysis, the recursive title is laden with the same poetic freight as 'Hedgehog' in *New Weather* that risks its own existence by its own denial of surrounding pressures, or the exorbitant title bursts upon the critical arena with superabundant semiosis, like a lexical meteorite, from the outside of the ordinary bounds of language to clash with the linguistic order, to hint at infinite possibility, and to explore the gradations between them. *Quoof* shines, shifts and slides with *alphaphilia* and *audio-fetishism*, a typical Muldonic lust for letters, and with his sense for sounds that augment the literary status quo and provide an alternative to customary paradigms in critical practice and habitual thinking.

Linguistic licence, tricks and spoofs, such as these, render the world, in the words of 'Snow' by MacNeice, one of Muldoon's favourite forefathers, 'incorrigibly plural,' but also, variegated and diffuse in its ways of being and saying.[13] Discovery of new words and idiomatic spectrality are part of Muldoon's verbal constellations and poetic universe. If the laws of language are inescapable, even for sceptical poets, Muldoon's linguistic awareness certainly indicates a radical interest in the functions and limits of language, and an incessant scrutiny of them. In its questioning of its own coming into being and its own linguistic quiddity, the eccentric title creates a space of suspension and emptiness which is perfectly poised to articulate the many indefinable states expressed in the volume. These shifting definitions, transitions and transgressions are variously productive of interpretations which serve to fill the hermeneutic void. Alternatives abound and they are abundantly produced by the volume.

The epigraph to *Quoof*, a paragraph from the Greenlandic polar explorer and anthropologist Knud Rasmussen's *The Netsilik Eskimos*, designates another endangered indigenous species, signals a search for *ultima thule* beyond Heaney's *North*, and articulates linguistic estrangement. Images of alternative

13 MacNeice, *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats*, 24. MacNeice is given the largest number of poems in Muldoon's extremely selective – it only includes ten poets – anthology of contemporary Irish poetry, and instead of an introduction Muldoon cites the famous radio debate between MacNeice and Higgins. For his explicit appreciation of his predecessor, see also *To Ireland, I* (London: Faber, 2008), 89–96; *The End of the Poem* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 26–27; Paul Muldoon, Donald Hall, Cynthia Huntington, Heather McHugh, Charles Simic, 'How to Peel a Poem,' *Harper's Magazine* Vol. 299, no. 1792 September (1999), 49; Claire Wills, Nick Jenkins, John Lancaster, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *Oxford Poetry* 3, no. 1 (1986/7), 17; Clare Brown and Don Paterson, *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words* (London: Picador, 2012), 195; Earl G. Ingersoll and Rubin Stan Savel, 'The Invention of the I: A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' *Michigan Quaterly Review* 37, no. 1 (1998), 68–69.

parenthoods from *Why Brownlee Left* anticipate the adscititious and the metamorphic, as an old foster-mother shaman transmutes into a male, marries her/his adoptive daughter, makes a sledge out of her genitals, and creates a black and white dog from her shit and snow. Questions of tribes, bestiality, ancestry, origin and identity, which dominated the previous books, are supplanted by incestuous transsexuality and magic engendering. The bodily dissection of the epigraph introduces metaphors of grotesque dismemberment, and elements of frost and of reprehensible corporeality – all of which add abjection and brutality to these textual otherworlds that embody the morphology, the interpoeticality and the linguistic alienation of Muldoon's transformative poetics. In its telling, the fantastic fable also signals a continued interest in alternative narrative in Muldoon's poetry and in the metamorphic agglutination of incongruent elements, shit and snow for example, all of which serves to inaugurate his many magical mergers of formal features in the volume. Raids on the sonnet have already become a Muldoonerism. In *Quoof* the conjoining of the sonnet with other poetic forms develops the intellectual invasion of this aesthetic form. The brief quotation from the Danish-Inuit arctic anthropologist conjures up an imaginative landscape, which provides and an antipatory analogy of the volume's many mental, artistic and linguistic elsewheres. This initial visionary image will transform itself throughout the poetic sequence and then converge, in a manner familiar from most of Muldoon's volumes, in a new set of discursive formations in the final, phonovisual, plurivisionary and propagandadaist non-biopic, a broken mirror to 'Immram,' the subjective correlative in the previous volume.

If these hermeneutic premonitions sound too grandiose, the first poem of the collection certainly attests to a fanciful state of mind, indeed, to a kind of shamanistic poetics and hallucinatory politics. 'Gathering Mushrooms' renders in five sonnets the persona's memories of his father's mushroom cultivation, and of his own drug-addled rambling with a friend on a riverbank. A journey from boyhood roots to fantasy takes place here. Muldoon's magical grammar and circuitous metaphors of self in the first lines expand to mushy intemporalities and hallucinogenic transformations of the persona into a speaking horse. Powerful puns – 'tripping' and 'skyhigh' (7) – place the romantic and the rapturous in provocative juxtaposition with the tragic and the political in their respective meanings of field romance and drug-induced departures, terrorist explosion and political call. Where the first four sonnets bring together individuality and family, and quotidian humdrum and euphoric intoxication, the fifth considers collective issues of down-to-earth realism versus elevated utopianism. Temporal planes, memories and hallucinations dissolve in the final apparition:

Come back to us. However cold and raw, your feet
were always meant
to negotiate terms with bare cement.
Beyond this concrete wall is a wall of concrete
and barbed wire. Your only hope is
to come back. If sing you must, let your song
tell of treading your own dung,
let straw and dung give a spring to your step.
If we never live to see the day we leap
into our true domain,
lie down with us now and wrap
yourself in the soiled grey blanket of Irish rain
that will, one day, bleach itself white.
Lie down with us and wait. (9)

These are callings from the deep heart's core: a religious credo and a political stance as much as an intervention by a Freudian superego, or concurrent demand from within a given community for the benefit of dissenters, defectors, joy-riding youths, and poets writing ad lib. In Muldoon's case, the lines record public pressures more than personal recriminations; even though his writing cannot avoid these strictures, it continuously resists and negotiates them in a recalcitrant fashion. Instead, the image of bare feet conveys a sense of religious saintliness and monastic impoverishment, and implies the injustices of the prison system. For all its dislocated character, which is reinforced by the italicised estrangement from the other voices and visions in the poem, the stanza echoes a Republican ethos. An adroit chiasmus buttresses general images of imprisonment and involution, and the idiomatic edge, for example in 'barbed wire' and 'blanket,' cuts into the fabric of internment, dirt protest and hunger strike. Art, in the sense of singing, is suspect and unwarranted, and can hardly be justified even if it submits to an approved agenda. Censorious claims, from Plato's *Republic* to more immediate political reproof, are evident. Well-crafted enjambments inscribe postponement of liberation and indefinite deferral of utopian outcomes, whether understood as a geopolitical solution or in terms of religious salvation. Biblical allusions and nationalist reference finally intertwine to suggest a common purpose and divine dimension to religious patience and Republican aspirations alike. This combination of mission and endurance is one that imbues the nationalist cause with its sense of its own longevity, but these reference points are also a reminder that religious anticipation tends to facilitate and extend coercion. If loyalty to local grounds implies subservience to the Republican cause in the final calling, this fealty is

radically undercut. This is seen in the estrangement of the rallying stanza: the summons is issued in a hallucination of an anthropomorphic horse – a fantastic source of origin and a literary technique that recalls the ironic ambiguities of Swift's talking horses in *Gulliver's Travels,* Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and the devices of defamiliarisation, as well as Muldoon's running catalogue of equestrian figures and italicisation, 'the monstrous refrain' of the first edition of *New Weather*.[14] Italicisation underscores the uncertain definitions and displacements of the stanza: a construction of citations that displays a mêlée of familiar discourses which have been uprooted from their sources and origins.

'Gathering Mushrooms' imposes itself forcefully on the many contexts of Northern Ireland, not least on imaginative and intellectual endeavours to conceptualise the civil crisis. Dislocated and abstrac, the fifth stanza presents in formal composition the idea of 'the fifth province,' an idealised space of the individual mind and of public culture, a radical alterity to political pragmatism and physical violence based on old mythology which aims for a new and unprejudiced union of opposing forces.[15] But this poem sits uneasily, as does 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' in *New Weather*, with a rallying cry for resolution, or for idealism and imaginary unifying constructs. Instead, the poem relativises the call for allegiance and this relativisation has repercussions in the spheres of culture and politics: ambiguity, inconclusiveness and meditative uncertainty frequently destablise decision, conviction and rhetoric in the poem. Muldoon's alterratives continuously challenge the normative and narrative. Muldoon's psilocybinic extravaganza also plays havoc with mycological metaphors of effacement and endurance. 'Gathering Mushrooms,' more of a poetic practice of Huxley's quasi-scientific indulgences in *Doors of Perception* (1954) than a meditation reminiscent of De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1821), is related to the secret conjugality and subterraneous machinations of Longley's namesake poem, and to the guarding of words in the courting of experienced lovers in Heaney's 'Twice Shy.'[16] Most strikingly, the sky-high razzmatazz of the magic mushrooms poses a provocative response to Mahon's sober elegy for voiceless, forgotten or silenced victims, the 'lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii,' South America and Northern Ireland in 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford.'[17] Both Mahon's gentle veneration and Muldoon's transgressive verses represent

14 Wright, 'Vaguely Nouvelle: *New Weather* by Paul Muldoon,' 442.

15 The 'unactualized space' and 'dis-position' of the fifth province was established as the guiding principle for *The Crane Bag*, the cultural and political journal that ran from 1977–85. M.P. Hederman and Richard Kearney, eds., *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982), 10–12.

16 Michael Longley, *No Continuing City* (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1969), 46; Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 31.

17 Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1999), 89.

in poetry the intellectual debate over the writer's responsibility or capacity to convey human anguish and misery. Adorno's postulation, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' states an impossibility, but Mahon's poem insists on the integrity of voicelessness, and reverential silence.[18] Muldoon's vociferous and ventriloquist verses border on the insane and the irrational, and observe the implications of Adorno's claim that poetry *after* Auschwitz needs to be entirely different than the poetry *before* Auschwitz. On this view, new forms of poetry need to engage with the unfathomable and unspeakable horrors of war and genocide and abandon understandable and conventional art, be it romanticist or realist modes, and instead adopt a 'radically darkened art' and an extreme type of writing that may never be understood. A. Alvarez articulates the same concerns in his introduction to *The New Poetry* in 1962, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle,' and Frank Ormsby reflects upon relations between the Troubles and poetry in his introduction to his anthology of poetry from Northern Ireland in 1992, *A Rage for Order*.[19] The reception of *Quoof* summarised above clearly shows that Muldoon's volume challenged the understanding of even the sharpest critics in 1983. On closer intertextual grounds, Muldoon's poem can, as always, be related to Heaney's poetics. Many of Heaney's essays tend to elide subtly his artistic independence with a more committed stance, and so does his poetry. If many of his essays return repeatedly to the Catch 22 of the artist in Northern Ireland, for example Heaney's conflict of 'Song and Suffering' (1988, pp. xi–xxiii), to which Muldoon's poem alludes, others tend to redress imbalances and advocate the adoption of a clearer set of allegiances: 'The prejudice against poetry as a self-conscious function of the national culture is so strong, that even to canvass the idea of connection between a founded nation and a founded poetic voice is in danger of being judged old-fashioned, if not down-right retrograde.'[20] These are some of the poetic discourses 'Gathering Mushrooms' references and refracts. It is a very indirect but not indifferent approach to serious social matters, their imaginative presentation and the

18 Theodor Adorno, W., 'Commitment,' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, [1965] 1980), 34.

19 A. Alvarez, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle,' in *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, [1962] 1988), 21–33; Ormsby, *A Rage for Order: Potery of the Northern Ireland Troubles*.

20 For Heaney's defence of 'the idea of connection between a founded nation and a founded poetic voice,' see *The Place of Writing*, 39. For his discussion of 'Art and Life,' 'Song and Suffering' during the Troubles, see 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekov's Cognac and a Knocker' in *The Government of the Tongue*, xi–xxiii. He continues discussions of the dilemma of aesthetic autonomy and communal commitment, as can be seen also in the title essay of *The Government of the Tongue*, 91–109; and in 'Frontiers of Writing' and in the title essay of *The Redress of Poetry*, 1–17, 186–204. He also addresses these concerns in his Nobel lecture, *Crediting Poetry*.

aesthetic debates that such depictions entail. Profoundly marked by the gravity of its political contexts, the poem records communal decrees and victimisation, commitment and freedom, but counters these with individual eccentricity and aesthetic autonomy. This relativisation of discourses amounts not to relativity; rather, it queries the many demands upon poetry, and their authority, and it captures the problems of identification in an overwhelming welter of alliances, and also asserts non-aligned affirmation, for poets in Northern Ireland, and for the two 'trippers' in the poem. Perhaps, poets and trippers are the same? Fran Brearton indicates this in her entertaining and edifying essays on the hares and rabbits and premises of poetry in Belfast in the Festschrift for Ciaran Carson, *From the Small Back Room.*[21] What is poetry for? How is it to be written in times of war, genocide and Troubles? 'Gathering Mushrooms,' in its undecidable italicisation, ambivalent vocabulary and wild phantasmagoria, makes use of ideas, forms and language that resist many of the critical claims, theoretical schools and ideological pressures that beset poetry, while also taking stock of these many impositions.

Altered and transformational states characterise *Quoof*. 'Gathering Mushrooms' initiates these mutations; 'Trance' spells them out. The title is marked by uncertain linguistic identities: 'Trance' incorporates modes of experience alongside the verbal, so the word names elsewheres encompassing change of states. Evidently, the word evokes states of mental detachment from external trappings, semi-conscious conditions of swooning, and fainting and hypnosis and catalepsies, and intermediate fugues of all kinds – between sleeping and waking, between intoxication and sobriety, between real and surreal – an inscrutable place of uncertainty and equivocation not unrelated to the *aisling*. Minimally different from 'trans' – in the sense of Latin preposition for across, to or on the farther side of, beyond and over, or as a colloquial abbreviation for a number of context-dependent nouns, translation and transmission among them – the title plays on positions and motions of many types. In fact, the title is predicated upon the many *trance*formations and *trance*plantions of the verses yet to come. Obsolete for peril, 'trance' also harbours its own warning against the superstition and natural intoxicants it celebrates. Appropriately, in Muldoon's adlinguistic explorations of the many functions of words beyond the merely representational, trance includes trace.

In 'Trance,' to which the psilocybinic states of the previous poem, 'Gathering Mushrooms,' serve a prefix, a mock Eucharist – a shamanistic ritual of 'red-and-white Fly Agaric' and 'mind-expanding urine' (10) from Siberia – is

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21 Fran Brearton, 'Hare and Rabbit,' in *From the Small Back Room*, ed. W.R. Irvine (Belfast: Netherlea, 2008), 64–69.

transplanted into the middle of a reverie of childhood Christmas, to transform both events. As rites of passage for the young and the initiated, juxtapositions of the secular and the sacred reveal the heathen elements that were always a part of the holy Christmas, and the religious dimension that was always part of celebrations of nature. Unfamiliar supernatural rites intertwine with traditions of Christmas, the arctic blends with the domestic, and an adult world of drug-induced illusions merges with a child's sense of magic in a dream logic of colours and seasons. These trances illuminate the heterogeneous and the elements of otherness that constitute tradition. This sense of tradition as always mutational in the first place is underlined by the poem's transfiguration of the sonnet form. Three seven-line stanzas, a triangle of semi-sonnets, play on their own permutations: the second stanza constitutes the beginning, the middle or the end, it solders or separates, it is part of a narrative or a self-contained section of poetic language, it can be removed – as can the two others – in a pared-back but accretional manipulation of meaning production. Probably in no other poetic composition have the intricacies of trilateralities of states – linguistic, mental, poetic, political and other – been rendered with more complexity.

'Trance' also dwells in its own transfigurations. An expansive metaphorical narcissism disregards poetic modesty, and points ostensibly to one of Muldoon's own hobby horses: his equestrian ebullience. The poem's final lines unpack the young boy's Christmas present, 'my new rocking horse / as yet unsteady on its legs' (10), a gift to Muldoon's past and future catalogue of horses, and an inanimate ancestor of Bucephalus – the speaking horse in *Madoc* – and a seminal signifier for the semiotic horseplay that runs circles around itself in Muldoon's poetry and transforms itself into the rocking horse in this poem, and the phantasmagoric centaur in the preceding one.

Undecidable states also inhabit 'The Mirror,' which constructs an imaginary zone for the undead, and which reflects perfectly a Bloomian anxiety of influence. 'In memory of my father,' claims the subtitle, and, insidiously, sets the scene for elegy: Patrick Muldoon died two years after the book was published. Muldoon's meditations on his undead father start with the Plath-ghosted 'The Waking Father' in his debut volume and continue in this volume's 'Cherish the Ladies,' which starts with the beguiling line 'In this, my last poem about my father' (*Q*, 25); he reverts to the theme of paternity by dedicating the next book, *Meeting the British*, to the memory of his deceased father. Deliberately undermining expectations and conventions, the commemoration of familial tragedy yet to come constitutes another riposte to literal-minded critics, and, possibly, an intended *coup de grâce* to biographical hermeneutics. Despite the sometimes extremely private tone of Muldoon's writing, perhaps at a peak in *The Prince of the Quotidian*, his texts reserve themselves as artefacts and in this

case, an unactualised reality is presented. In the striving to come to terms with loss and sorrow before the fact, the tripartite division of fractured sonnets in 'The Mirror' reflects the complexities of filial love, an existence divided against itself, and a confession of spiritual bonds between the living and the dead. Imaginatively, the father returns to mount together with his son the mirror that caused his death. Premonitions of sorrow are imagined in the gothic gloom of a crypt, in the ghosted mirror and in the return of the living dead. Familial relations remain ambiguously unresolved as reflected in the final uncertainties, and in the implicit absolution configured in the imagery of crucifixion:

> And we lifted the mirror back in position
> above the fireplace,
> my father holding it steady
> while I drove home
> the two nails. (13)

Possibly an elegy before death occurs, the poem is also a dolorous hymn to the gestalt of Muldoon's own poetry and his many literary forefathers.

In 'Vampire' the birds drink 'the images of themselves' and the poem's agoraphobic and neurasthenic perspectives construct the protagonist's own illusionary space: 'Carefully appointed mirrors / Create the illusion of depth' (*NW*, 31). Both 'Vampire' and 'The Mirror' reflect the inescapably vertiginous intro spection and the recursive intratextuality that appear as a permanent aspect of Muldoon's poetic language. While both parents were still alive, Muldoon dedicated *New Weather* 'for my Fathers and Mothers,' what Kendall aptly terms a 'polycentric pedigree.'[22] 'The Mirror' states: 'from the Irish of Michael Davitt.' Michael Davitt, the political organiser, Fenian and Land League founder, is a possible dedicatee. Michael Davitt, Muldoon's younger poet colleague, Gaelic champion and *Innti* founder, with whom Muldoon has cooperated and whose poetry he has translated, is a more likely dedicatee, in which case the dedication is indicative of a younger literary forefather whose relations with Muldoon have so far remained largely unexplored by the critical community. Scores of unnamed generational sources – prior, present and future – are also implicated.

'The Mirror,' in its own reflexivity, reflects an awareness of libidinal understandings of the sign as these have been postulated in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and the poem harbours a meta-theoretical awareness

22 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 33.

indebted to Lacan, and to the theories of influential forefathers advanced by Harold Bloom. Lacan's classic essay, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,' explores the transformative moment in the development of the subject, the 'Aha-Erlebniss' in which the subject discovers a projected totality of her or his own uncoordinated body and disparate consciousness, a recognition that facilitates the subject formation of the so-called 'mirror stage.'[23] Formation of identity, according to Lacan, always results from an exchange with reflections exterior, distant and different to the perceiving self, a process of misrecognition. On this view, subjectivity is always split and alienated, and permanently striving towards completion – a process which is both a stage in human genesis (infancy) and a permanent process of the (expanding) human consciousness. An inchoate mind – the liberating and creative energies of which are witnessed in art from surrealism to stream of consciousness – is as plausible as an everyday common-sense rationality, but Lacan's splendid metaphor of the mirror cracks when converted into formative mental reflections: dreams, images, fictions, language. Imaginary and linguistic realms are never stable and replete, rather they are fragmented, dislocated and transient, and they cannot in themselves be extricated and postulated outside of heteromorphic individuation. However, the implications of the Lacanian standpoint on the formation of artistic identity is clear: creativity and the aspirations of the individual artist are always already intertwined in a nexus of texts, the continuous semiosis of self, language, literature, visual arts, music, irrationality and metamorphic modes of meaning. The endless release and excessive possibilities of such overwhelming intertextuality contain a menacing disempowerment in its threat to obliterate distinctions of subject, object and genre. Muldoon's 'The Mirror' can be read as an acknowledgement of his spectral poetics – his blend of fluorescent madcap farragoes, for example in 'The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants' at the end of this volume – but also the fear of obliteration of distinct singular qualities: 'I was afraid that it would sneak / down from the wall and swallow me up / in one gulp in the middle of the night' (13). In Muldoon's poetic language, these breath-taking textual swirls from his textual forefathers, that threaten to suffocate his own integrity, mark one of his many distinct singularities.

Lacan's mirror stage centres primarily on a pre-Oedipal phase in the advent of language and these are the two aspects of artistic creation Bloom develops in *The Anxiety of Influence*. In his view of how poetic relations are engendered, chronology is abnegated and misprision creates productive synergy.

23 Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' in *Lacan: Écrits: A Selection*, ed. Alan Sheridan (London: Routlegde, [1949] 2001), 1–9.

'The Mirror' also reflects the very premeditated, canon-conscious and intertextual negotiations that have marked Muldoon's writing so obtrusively up to this point in Muldoon's career. By means of symbolic referentiality, the poem discloses this volume's revaluations of self, its canonical navigations and, in particular, Muldoon's agon with Heaney, the older poet. Most especially, the poem marks a point of self-assertive conviction, a prominent coming to terms with the anxiety of influence, a placing of himself as the *apophrade*, in Bloomian terms, to himself and fellow poets, past, present and future: 'The strong poet peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become.'[24] How will it be possible to read Heaney's early oeuvre, *North* in particular, without noticing shards of Muldoon's idiom enhancing the Nobel Laureate's art? How will it be possible to read Muldoon's early work without noticing a critical anxiety towards Heaney, and glimpses of the splendour of the senior? How will Muldoon's later texts direct the interpretation of his earlier texts and vice versa? What other texts will be revivified by Muldoon's intertextuality as much his own texts are revivified by other texts?

'The rage of Caliban at not seeing his face in the mirror,' Buck Mulligan proclaims to Stephen and provokes his fatherless co-lodger's bitter and most famous response in the first chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked looking-glass of a servant.' The mirror metaphor of Muldoon's staged elegy reflects a long tradition of aesthetic considerations of the nature and purpose of art in Irish-English relations, which over the last hundred years runs from the aesthetic reflexivity of Dorian Gray to the self-incriminatory introspection in Heaney's early prose.[25] In its uncertainties, circularities and resort to anti-realist aesthetics via self-reflexive artistic strategies, 'The Mirror' employs a language that operates problematically on the margins of solipsism and representation, and its high artifice and supernatural dimension turn the standard image of realistic and representational art into one of intertextual reflection and anxiety.

Langue as a trance and trans in itself, as an anxious state between the actual world and artistic writing, between rationality and reverie, between the animate deceased and deceased survivors, remains, however morbid and macabre

24 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 147.

25 'I remember a dream that I'd had last year in California. I was shaving at the mirror of the bathroom when I glimpsed in the mirror a wounded man falling towards me with his bloodied hands lifted to tear at me or to implore me.' Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 33.

that may sound, very attractive to poets who are bent on a life and a language less ordinary.[26] Some of this attraction can be seen in 'The Right Arm,' in which a young boy gets his hand stuck in a sweet-jar:

> I would give my right arm to have known then
> how Eglish was itself wedged between
> *ecclesia* and *église*.
>
> The Eglish sky was its own stained-glass vault
> And my right arm was sleeved in glass
> that has yet to shatter. (11)

'Eglish,' from the Gaelic for Church, names the village in Armagh where Muldoon lived his first four years, but this is a Gaelic place-name and -naming that have been conjugated in church practice and the Latin and French languages, and which is only a single letter – n – from being turned into English. Unlike the liberating knowledge and etymology of *dinnseanchas*, Muldoon's play on 'Eglish' as a place-name here hints at disabling lack of awareness, and at a language that is already spliced with other languages, and is, plainly different but also similar, indeed almost identical to, the principal language from which it is supposed to be different: English. Semantic slide and alphabetic play render the etymology of the townland in which the boy is rooted transitional in the first place. Eglish in Armagh turns out to be a less than stable linguistic sign for a clearly turbulent geographical locale. Armagh – that place of conflict and catastrophe as well as ordinary life, which Muldoon rendered within an apocalyptic frame in 'Armageddon, Armageddon' – is here present, in an abbreviated form, in the title's 'Arm.' This truncation, which cuts so well into the hypothesised amputation in this poem, 'I would give my right arm,' is realised in the cruel torture and murder in 'The Hands' (14), a title and poem that are obviously extrapolated from 'The Arm,' and which allude with blood and gore to the complex myths of The Red Hand of Ulster. '*After the German of Erich Arndt*,' the sub-text of 'The Hands' reads, thereby listing another father in the volume. Its reference to Arendt's defection to Civil War Spain from Hitler's Germany, its images of bloody mutilation and harrowing guilt – 'in a state of shock' and

26 That Muldoon's poetry inhabits unusual aspects of life and language is evident in his striking subject matters, incessant formal experimentalism and relentlessly experimental language. At the time of writing *Quoof*, he was also very explicit about this: 'I should begin by announcing my prejudice against ordinariness, particularly ordinary domestic life, the tedium of which, if I understand it correctly, is precisely what most of us spend most of our days trying to avoid or postpone' (Muldoon, *The Irish Times*, 1981, 496).

'far-fetched hands' (14) – and its play on 'rock' and home release the liberation, the amputation, the coming of age and the ominous linguistic power and political menace of 'The Arm,' which, of course, changes its meaning dramatically in the light of 'The Hands.' The two poems look askance at each other on either side of 'The Mirror.' 'The Right Arm,' opposed, perhaps, to 'my left foot,' is muscular with physical dominance and upright with moral superiority; yet it also, normally, designates the writing hand, one which in the poem has been lured into a confinement from which it needs to free itself. A writing hand stuck in a sticky sweet-jar, an image of transparent confinement and saccharine allurement about to crack, is potent with the shattering of linguistic innocence and the breaking of artistic form, and carries with it portents of the severance and violence to which it might lead.

If the significance of a single letter, -n- in Eglish, is extremely conspicuous by its absence in 'The Right Arm,' another single letter, -o-, is importantly present in a seemingly inadvertent manner in 'The Sightseers.' A family that sets out for 'the brand-new roundabout at Ballygawley' (15) ends up in the realm of recollection when the uncle recalls a previous incident in the same place:

> They held a pistol so hard against his forehead
> there was still the mark of an O when he got home. (15)

The 'O' shapes the personal and public life of a family caught in the loops of daily traffic, of violence and recurrent trauma. There are alphabetic inscriptions in the rounds of daily life: road-blocks, involuntary memories and 'B-specials,' as much as in the contemporary realities of H-blocks, the RUC, the SAS, the UDA, the UVD, the IRA – a coded maze of acronyms with social and psychological messages and meanings. The verses themselves are also circular and coded, from the turning of the Ss in the title, 'The Sightseers,' to the distribution of Os in the lines, in this unusually recognisable sonnet form. This dispensation of ovality also extends to a line from the first poem – '*it was mushrooms she was gathering O*' (7) to key words, o-sounds and the reinscription of lines in the end cycle of transmogrifying sonnets 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants: 'Oglala Sioux' (48), 'Ovid's' (50), 'Go, Johnny, Go, Go, Go' (52), 'O Gallogly' (62), '*And she said I am gathering mushrooms / to make my mammy ketchup O*' (57). The circular structure recalls the compositions of earlier volumes, not least 'Immram' and Immrama' in *Why Brownlee Left*, poems from which the final poem in this volume, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' derives, and to which it returns with a vengeance. In its codes, italicisations and oscillating boundaries, 'The Gathering' also conducts an anticipatory critique of a future event. While harking back to the reiterative

'Toome, Toome' in 'Toome' and 'the black *O* in *Broagh* of Heaney's *dinnseanchas* in *Wintering Out*, 'The Sightseers' downscales the global 'O' of Heaney's 'Alphabets' in *The Haw Lantern*, and undermines the strong sense of transition, transformations and transcendence that are in evidence in Heaney's lexicon of the border terrain in *The Haw Lantern*. Similarly, 'The Sightseers' retains a greater sense of human and social location and grounding than the alphabetic technicalities of Carson's *Opera Et Cetera*, and several of Muldoon's own alphabetic symphonies to come. This reiterative circularity plays out a sense of decentring, tracing and simulated origin, well known from post-structuralist philosophy, in the very composition of the letter, the poem and the book. In the context of Northern Ireland, this poses an alternative to radical discourses of all kinds, whether of the revolutionary or transcendent kind. Such a challenge to established dialectics must be accordingly conceived in all its menace and monstrosity.

In keeping with a poetry of undecidable states concerned with polycentric pedigrees in which single letters take on complex significance, the title poem asserts itself abrasively. The uncanny title, 'Quoof,' a title in which at least four of the letters play in various ways upon the letter o, signals flagrantly the attempt to put forward the unutterable in utterance itself. The titular conundrum eschews any easy access to the mysteries of poetry and language, and posits an unusual challenge to the reader in its abjuration of ordinary communication and resistance to habitual hermeneutic incursions. Muldoon's idiosyncratic nonce-word, a cute little beast and a cuddly little monster of alphabetic construction, induces a sense of enigma and *ostranenie*, as well as indulging in a mischievious linguistic drive and phonetic relish. The word's hermeneutic vacuum draws the reader into a vortex of textual fluidity: when, a semantic signified is largely absent, the linguistic play has no end. Edna Longley correlates the title with 'spoof.'[27] Michael Allen, to whom Muldoon dedicates the elegy 'A Dent' (OTTWK, 22) and who is another of the fathers in Muldoon's polycentric pedigree agrees, adds 'quiff' and 'quim.'[28] 'Quaat?' queries Mahon.[29] The semantic vacuum spins uncontainably with alternative significance. In fact the coinage's absence of referential value opens an associative process of letter linking which does not stop with Longley's or Allen's suggestions; rather, it continues from Mahon's question and swirls with quiff quaff quim quad quag quack queen queer quern quest queue quiche quick quid quill quilt quince quote quip quire quite quit quirk quist quiz quod

27 Longley, 'Uncovering the Deadly Depths,' 31.

28 Michael Allen, 'Muldoon's Magic Mushrooms,' *The Honest Ulsterman*, no. 75 (1984), 66.

29 Mahon, 'Quaat?' 27.

quoit qursh quat, quoot or quoop poof coof cute cool goof gouge gout gowk hoof hoop hoot huff IOOF IOU jook jouk duke joule Joyce kook loop loup loupe moo mooch mood moon nook noon nope ooh oomph ooze oops poof pouf pouffe proof Proust roof root rood poop poop scoop spoof scrooge scroop shoo shoot shoo shunt sloop sloot sleuth smooth smooch smoothbore smote snoop snoot sonnet snooze spook spoof stooge stoke tool troop woof yoof yonks zooks, to mention but a few, all of supplementary equality. If these departures seem too far-fetched, there is good reason to point out that the pregnant term *quoof* engenders its own textual progeny in the final poem, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants': 'squats,' 'Esquire,' 'quartz,' 'aquarium,' 'quorum,' 'swoop,' 'Quinze,' 'proof,' 'woods,' 'quarrel,' 'cough,' 'quim,' 'Queen's,' 'quad,' 'qibble,' 'Algonquin,' 'quiver,' '*Quite*,' 'squints,' 'quiff' (40–62). These outrageous contortions release some of the hyper-linguistic and super-phonetic drive, some of the subtle parachiming and lexical serendipity, and some of the alphabetics upon which Muldoon's poetic language is predicated. All of these deviations from ordinary standards of poetic decorum and linguistic order testify to the panache of Muldoon's poetic language, a language that confirms its own creativity with no need for justification. But these deviations and aberrations are also well suited to a restless poetry that disdains to be co-opted by essentialisms, and to adhere to stabilities of whatever kind.

Perhaps the title word is actually a Gaelic word, an un-collected English word forgotten by most people, a translation, a mis-said idiosyncracy , a spoonerism, an anagram, a pun, a rhyme, an inscribed annihilation of meaning that still means; any of these, all of them or none of them? The poem itself offers some solution:

> How often have I carried our family word
> for the hot water bottle
> to a strange bed,
> as my father would juggle a red-hot half-brick
> in an old sock
> to his childhood settle.
> I have taken it into so many lovely heads
> or laid it between us like a sword.
>
> An hotel room in New York City
> with a girl who spoke hardly any English
> my hand or her breast
> like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti

> or some other shy beast
> that has yet to enter the language. (17)

The poem's own explication of the word is obviously partial and spurious, as the initial inexplicability of the title also covers the mysteries of growing up, of geographical traversals, adventures of sex and of language. Muldoon's own explanation of the poem also leaves the title word in limbo: 'I should mention that I wondered for a long time about the etymology of this word 'quoof.' Did it come from Gaelic? From Elizabethan English, like so many of my father's words? According to him, he first heard it from us, his children.'[30] Muldoon traces the title's own coming into being back to a complex of uncertainties, differences and deferrals, whereas the poem extends these complexities into the future. The poem deals with childhood, adolescence, exile and sex; a mixture of some of the most typical Irish themes as well as some of the greatest challenges to any writer. Muldoon's unheard-of title and the musing on language in the poem are two means of conquering cliché by means of creativity. Some of the poem's linguistic play and unbridled speculations on language invaginate its own themes, such as the mysteries of linguistic and human intercourse, adolescence and alienation.

Anagrammatic readings of the unintelligible title, 'foouq' or 'fooq u,' embed in a vulgar brogue the sexual anticipation of the poem and the reversal of positions of the two lovers, with a possible play on Foucault's name and a reference to his genealogy of the desiring subject in *The History of Sexuality*. As befits the heading of an open-ended corpus, the multivalent title resists ordinary interpretative incursions and instead opens out the semiotic field onto a broad interpretative vista. The linguistic alienation and acrobatics obviously converge with the intimacy with the foreign woman, her features, and arguably suggest associations of creation and contamination. Conversely, the inscrutable mysteries of intimate human interaction illustrate the mystical qualities of linguistic inventiveness and poetic virility. In this encounter, values meet without which there would be no date. At an unspecified time in a non-particular place, the random event, the chance meeting of two people, the coincidence or the conjecture, occurs with the other: the ineluctably coupled and complex singularity of time, place, partner, poem, word, *quoof*. The encounter takes place in a rented room in a metropolitan capital, New York; yet *quoof* is *unheimlich* in the habitation and economy of language. An utterance is always dated and in the process of becoming dated. It becomes dated in the process of unfolding itself as it enters into language. The parties of 'Quoof' are all different, and thus

30 Muldoon, 'Paul Muldoon Writes,' 1–2.

equal. They are all marked by difference. The date in 'Quoof' offers itself as present, the specific gift at a singular moment that has passed but at present moves towards entering the language as a neo-Muldoonerism, the possible event of inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary, of a subsequent date perhaps yet to come – what is dated is not yet dated. What *quoof* gives us to think is the passing of words in different bodies. The untranslatable and intransdatable quality of *quoof* appears as an uncommonplace, a slippery catchword, a 'red-hot half-brick in an old sock,' a stone to trouble the critical stream, an enigma in the battle of the books, a textual embodiment that dates, an intelligendering fugitive, writing that apprehends the labours of logical concatenation, a poetic word in Muldoon's poetic language.

Part of the poem's play, appeal and abandonment lies in its textual relations: by turns exhibiting qualities that are attractive, anxious, violent and incestuous. Certainly, *quoof* is redolent of Chesterton's Dickensian 'mooreeffoc'; it also evokes the familiar intertextuality of Tolkien's phonetic imagination, or the 'quidditch' and 'quaffles' of the contemporary wizardry at Hogwarts. Muldoon's linguistic coinage would not be *unheimlich* in Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, nor ill-timed in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, nor in the Norwegian Axel Jensen's *Epp* or *Lul* for that matter. The resonance with the bizarre and uncanny in the fairy word-world is also evident, and fluctuates with the fantasies and frustrations of childhood; 'quoof' reverberates with the lexico-phonetic thrills of revolting rhymes and nonsensical verse, in which Roald Dahl and Edward Lear excel. The fiction of Joyce and Burgess has also helped to incarnate the ovular otherworld-ness of *quoof* with writing, infidelity, violence. 'Quoof' thus represents the juxtaposition of childhood innocence and cosmopolitan sophistication, just as *quoof* galumphs across Muldoon's linguistic inventiveness and, perhaps, into the Oxford English Dictionary dictionary, like a latter day jabberwocky. 'Quoof' signals a new second coming, an era in which human hermeneutics cannot escape linguistic mediation – a concept of linguistics, logos and future that to many can only be thought of as sheer monstrosity.

Is there any overlap between the yeti and the quoofing and the woman and the man in the poem? The unknown woman, 'who spoke hardly any English' – perhaps the same meeting or a second one with the woman from 'Identities' (*NW*, 13), or similar ones – falls close to becoming doubly subjectivised by male bravura and linguistic power. Yet the woman, as the poem itself, resists being identified by conventional gender balance or traditional poetic tropes; they both oppose the confining strictures Kristeva once called phallogocentrism. Sharing a rented bed in a metropolitan hotel in an alien culture and a (for her) foreign language, the unknown woman nevertheless retains a room of her

own. She does not lose her cool in the heat – it is the man who risks being reduced to a lost memory. They are both equally much embodied in the verbless freeze-frame of the final verses and the balanced distribution of feminine and masculine rhyme grants them parity of esteem. The woman, the man, the couple resist the binarism and the victimisation of women and nationhood that Patricia Coughlan identified and criticised so scathingly as being pervasive in Irish poetry.[31] Muldoon's giving in to the seductive powers of language results in unusual presentations, of women, of men, of sex and of language – 'antibodies against literal-minded critics' – which often rebuff conventional approaches to poetry, and the theories from which the derive.[32]

In the possible conjugality of seminal and semantic dissemination in the poem, there are future echoes of the birth of tragedy. The yeti stalks the poem as an unrealised monstrosity, like a shy beast that slouches after the manner of Yeatsian annunciation and bestiality in 'The Second Coming.' On the margins of the rational and the sayable, the yeti lurks like a linguistic manifestation of a concept that has yet to be found. As a fantastic creature from a foreign realm, the yeti traverses the uncanny situation of the deracinated couple in the metropolis. As a powerful linguistic beast that has not yet fulfilled the vacant position in language, the yeti also suggests the anticipatory position of the partners. Half monster and half wo-man, the terrible beauty of the abominable snowman bears its own metonomy, its own supplementary absence of bisexual desire, and its own linguistic becoming. As a malleable metonym, the yeti enters a process of substitution and transformation with the volume's epigraph from Rasmussen's *The Netsilik Eskimos*, the two succeeding poems, 'Big Foot' and 'Beaver,' the many Ovidian metamorphoses of the final sonnet sequence 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' and with the translations into English from the Irish in Gabriel Rosenstock's *Portrait of the Artist as an Abominable Snowman* (1989). The traces of *quoof* and the yeti can be detected in later volumes also, for example in the fable animal in 'Rainer Maria Rilke: The Unicorn' where 'the beast that has never actually been … might come into its own' (*H*, 17). The genealogy of what might still come is further intertwined in the fact – congenial or coincidental – that these two poems appear on the same page, page 17, in two different books and can be likened to each other. Poems in *Quoof* also construct their own focal point for the auto-evaluation that appears in 'Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy,' in a remorseless redoubling of Heaney's

31 Coughlan, '"Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,' 88–111.

32 Longley, 'Uncovering the Deadly Depths,' 31.

purgatorial recriminations in his Dantean 'Station Island' in *Station Island*. In his later volume *Hay,* Muldoon recants:

> Warren Zevon, whose hymns
> to booty, to beasts, to bimbos, boom, boom
> are inextricably part of the warp and woof
> of the wild and wicked poems in Quoof. (*H*, 38)

Quoof, the term and the title, the poem and the poems, is a volume that swirls in its own trance, trans and traces. This is also evident in its transfiguration of the sonnet form.

> There is no reading worthy of being communicated to another unless it deviates to break form, twists the lines from a shelter, and so makes a meaning through that shattering of belated vessels. That shattering is rhetorical, yes, but more than language is thus wounded or blinded.[33]

Thus, the new rhetorician Bloom argues in his breaking of canonical form. As a sonnet, 'Quoof' glows with *quoof*, with the 'red-hot, half-brick in an old sock,' with traditional passion and modern connotations of contraceptives in this 'one night stanza,' as Edna Longley has so attractively termed the Muldonic sonnet.[34] The fluid prosody and subtle aurality are dissociated from ordinary metre and rhyme and this deconstructed sonnet blends with Muldoon's critical creativity in continuously exploring what makes a sonnet a sonnet. Sixteen of the twenty-eight poems in this volume, roughly two thirds of Muldoon's poems from 'Kate Whiskey' in *New Weather* to 'A Humming Bird' in *Plan B,* have intercourse with the sonnet and have resulted in a series of new critical idioms. Michael Donaghy terms them 'crumbled sonnets,' Neil Corcoran 'irregular sonnets,' Bernard O' Donoghue 'para-sonnets.'[35] Edna Longley writes with humour and androgynous perspicacity of the sonnet form in *Quoof* that they are 'so heavily disguised that its own mother (whether Petrarch or Shakespeare) wouldn't know it,' deems them 'elastic sonnets,' and writes of their unfolding that '"sequence" seems too serial a term for a set of relations more akin to a

33 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 22.

34 Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 225.

35 Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 81; Neil Corcoran, 'The Shy Trickster,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1983, 1180; Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Magic Mushrooms,' *The Poetry Review* 73, no. 4 (1983), 53.

Rubik cube.'[36] The breaking of form and the flexibility and acrobatics of the sonnets in *Quoof* are inextricably interwoven with the volume's transmogrifying sexuality, its varieties of alternate states, its destructive violence and its linguistic diversity.

'Quoof' performs its own semiosis. The conspicuous new word retains uncanny alphabetic familiarity and draws attention to its own semantic emptiness, by which it signals new meanings. Muldoon's poetic language is no transparent ether, white mythology, and does not give priority of meaning over its mode of articulation, or vice versa. His writing traverses stabilities within the logic and economy of language and meaning. In 'Quoof' – the linguistic vacuum of an apparently empty sign – the engendering of language and textuality and the breaking of form invite future meanings that have not yet been defined, and introduce the many queer poems to come in the volume.

Sex and violence are often coupled together in the following poems in *Quoof*, as are sex and bestiality. All these couplings, even ménages à trois, also inform the language in which they are rendered. In all their implications of sexuality, bestiality and violence, 'Big Foot' and 'Beaver' spawn naturally from 'Quoof.' 'The Salmon of Knowledge,' with all 'her hackled gulp of semen' and 'his name' 'writ in water' (23) signals, among many meanings, the coming into being of signs and semiosis. The word 'Umlaut' is associated with unprocreative sex in 'Sky-Woman' while semantic secrets are hinted at in 'Kissing and Telling,' two poems that feature one-night stands. Erotics and violence underlie the equivocal verses of 'Yggdrasill,' '*from* Last Poems,' 'The Unicorn Defends Himself' and 'The Destroying Angel.' 'My father and I and Billy Two Rivers' offers a canny take on actual and staged forms of violence, and their respective double communication and coded intelligences. The cunning linguistics of failure and surreal nightmare are evident in 'Blewits,' where the fury of impotence and anal aggression also ring with the violation of traditional sonnet form and the social malformation of the Troubles. More explicitly, the formal constraints, the cagey sense of escape and the feral poetics of 'Mink' evoke the ideologies of incarceration and liberty, and the harrowing para-military atrocity to which it refers.[37] 'A moral for our times,' states 'The Frog' ambiguously (29), and the slippery amphibian embodies literary progenitors from Gerald of Wales to Seamus Heaney, historical accounts and anecdotes, just as the squeezing of the frog like a lemon symbolises torture but

36 Longley, 'Uncovering the Deadly Depths,' 31; *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 196.

37 Robert Nairac is one of the disappeared who has not yet been recovered. He was an undercover agent believed to have been murdered and disappeared by the IRA in 1977.

also heavy-handed hermeneutics. Idealism clashes with secular sordidness in the substitution in 'Aisling' of venereal disease and anorexia – both disturbed and devout – for political ideas of reunion and physical force, in a poem which evokes a transfiguration of the traditional feminine representation of Ireland in the dream vision of a Stuart liberator who might free Ireland from national occupation.

Other poems in *Quoof* assume *gravitas* by linguistic play or by expanding into the ekphrastic. 'A Trifle' plays on bagatelle and pudding in a reduction of terrorist menace to everyday annoyance. During 'another bomb alert' (30) at lunchtime, a woman keeps her mind on the dessert while being evacuated from the building under threat. For all the impending violence and terror in this book, this routine behaviour is frightening in its normalisation of uncivilised outrage. If her fixation is neurotic, it still seems a very healthy and harmless one. In her normality, she contrasts with all the women less ordinary in the volume. Her sweet-tooth counteracts the anorexia in 'Aisling,' the sexual appetites and erotic indulgences in so many poems, and the elaborate drug consumption everywhere. A poem that presents and counteracts so lightly the forces of death, destruction and disorder that impinge themselves throughout – the poetic *quiddity* of quid pro quo violence in Belfast and Northern Ireland – is not a piece of little importance.

Some poems, in addition to their linguistic and formal introspection, have recourse to non-alphabetic texts to establish their hermeneutic frame. 'The Unicorn Defends Himself' alludes to Flemish tapestries, 'Yggdrasill' italicises a reference to Dermot Seymour's painting *The Russians Will Water Their Horses on Lough Neagh*, and the final synaesthetic symphony 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' mentions '*Guernica*,' 'Jackson Pollock,' 'Edward Hopper' and 'Derricke' (51, 60, 63). Still, the poetic diptych, 'Mary Farl Powers *Pink Spotted Torso*' and 'Edward Kienholz *The State Hospital*,' enacts more comprehensively the named visual objects of their reference. The latter poem delineates in an octave and two sestets the American installation artist's gruesome cell interior, which indicts the institutionalisation of society's marginalised and apparently discarded members. Kienholz' multimedia installation of American state penitentiary horrors touches the raw nerves of incarceration and hunger strike in the Maze crisis of the early 1980s. The rendition of the print by Mary Farl Powers, a precursor to Muldoon's celebratory eulogy of her, 'Incantata' (*AC*, 13–29), appears inaccessible, elliptic and opaque, like some of her art and some of the events to which the poem alludes. An image of the artist with her instrument, a potato, remains isolated from a picture book of Minnesota and a survivor crawling out of a car crash – a scene with echoes of joyride and escape-route crashes. Creative processes of carving and printing

shape the lines and caesura, which are hard to align interpretatively. Again, in both poems, Muldoon relativises the local and the immediate with the dislocated and the distant. The poems' ekphrastic quality enhances this disjucture of the living present with other locations and other times. Ekphrasis moves the text to the margins of the linguistic and the pictorial; the technique expands the ordinary poetic remit and twins its own medium with its sister art. Likewise, the use of standard font and *italicisation* in the title presents a unity of graphic differences, a visual of the vacillation between life and art, between poetry and painting, between the international and the national, and between language and reference in these ekphrastic poems.

The aesthetic dimension of painters and their paintings reinforces the sheer visuality of much of Muldoon's poetic language, and, in this volume, adds another transformative mode to the multiple states of trance and trans. All of these poems, however, in their bestiality, sexuality, ekphrasis and linguistic features, retain something of the curious and the queer that the title term *Quoof* contains and they contribute to the commanding principle of imagining a state different from self-identification, whether personal, public, geographical, poetic or verbal. Such impulses of double visions and differentiation, of indirection, fracture and relativisation also ensue from the capacities of language *per se*. As is to be expected, the final composition is inscribed with a complex combination of the volume's many idioms.

The language of 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' is insatiable, intransitive and dynamic. This beast of a poem devours language, almost bringing about its own annihilation: it is a terrorist tale that bites off more than its own tail. Gallogly, an attenuate main character involved in paramilitary activities in Northern Ireland, is on the run from the British army while being tailed by Mangas Jones, an American Indian. The double chase that takes place in America and Northern Ireland moves through assassinations, bomb blasts, dirty protests and hunger strikes, but the story line is continuously confused with merging identities and its own intertextual processes. In its audacious orchestrations of poetic language and forms, this transgeneric narrative of ever-changing sonnets operates critically within the conceptual domain of structure, sign and play, with a force and signification that attempt a liberation from received understandings of a poet's intellectual enterprise. Its incessant attempts to transgress the language and poetic structures from which it cannot escape becomes an imperative task that defines its artistic value. Omnidesirous and intransitive, this *tour de force* of transformative poetic language is the best contemporary proof of the 'linguistic daring,' 'ludic and literary self-consciousness,' 'poetic bizzarrerie,' 'renewed interest in narrative' and 'preoccupation with relativism' that Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion detected in

the early 1980s, suggesting as they do that poetry from Northern Ireland had the edge over poetry from the rest of the UK.[38]

'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' expands the limits of Muldoon's experimentalism language and poetic forms. These explorations of the poetic also bear upon ideas of identity and society. The poem's sequence of forty-nine sonnets constitute an enigmatic narrative, a masterpiece of Muldonic alterrative, based on the Trickster cycle of the Winnebago Indians. This transformer-figure from North American Indian myth, which Ted Hughes also made use of in *Crow*, seems conducive as a medium for the volume's many transfigurations, and for its many metamorphoses. Moreover, as always with Muldoon's Amerindian double vision, it allows for intricate ethno-critical commentary on cognitive formations of self and society. While referring to the transformative capacity of the individual and the resilience of the Republican movement on the whole, the shape-changing magician also lays bare this movement's adhesion to myth. Simultaneously, this resuscitation of the Amerindian myth serves to focus new attention on the culture, plight and cause of native-American people. Nevertheless, as Muldoon declares, this poem is also a poem about language: 'As far as it's about anything, the poem is about the use, or abuse, of the English language in Ireland.'[39]

In fact, the name Gallogly is a corruption of *gallóglaigh*, the Gaelic for a foreign young warrior, a mercenary, in its assimilation of 'gall' for foreigner and 'oglach' for young warrior. This linguistic corruption signals the corrosion of identity and anticipates the confusion with his shadow and alter ego, Mangas Jones, the 'Oglala Sioux.' Linguistic transformations underpin the processes of self-refashioning and the sense of social change. As the poem unfolds, the characters tend to overlap and merge to such a degree that there is no way of telling which one of them, or both, or any, figure in the poem's final scene, whether it is 'Gallogly, or Gollogly, / otherwise known as Golightly, / otherwise known as Ingoldsby, / otherwise known as English' or 'gallowglass' (58, 63).

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38 In highlighting the achievements of Ciaran Carson, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian and Tom Paulin, Morrison and Motion locate Northern Ireland as the place where 'the new spirit in British poetry began to make itself felt' and adduce Heaney as 'the most important new poet of the last fifteen years.' *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, 12–13. Still, for all his formidable art, the editors' description fits Muldoon's poetry far better than it does Heaney's in view of the latter's etymological purity, his sense of the solemn and the sacred, and his preference for the lyrical and the rooted. Although 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' was probably in press at the time, whereas 'Immram' and 'Quoof' made it into their anthology, the poem appears as the best exemplar of Morrison and Motion's claim.

39 Muldoon, 'Paul Muldoon Writes,' 1.

Certainly, this continuous change of monikers is indicative of the transient shifting of selves on the part of uncertain characters within equivocal worlds, but the g-string of names also revels in sonorous alliteration and the grunts and galumphs and gallivanting of letters themselves. Such semiotic shifts also stress the shades and not the similarity of synonyms: if you use other words, you generate other meanings. The many shape-shifters also assume a great number of guises, 'wearing a candy-stripe king-size sheet,' 'sporting your Donegal tweed suit and your Sunday shoes,' 'ill-fitting brogues,' 'equipped with a bow sight and a quiver of hunting arrows,' 'lime-green dungarees, green Wellingtons, a green helmet of aspect terrible' (42–60). A strong sense of chameleonic camouflage and under-cover operations is evident from the many costumes, as well as being, too obviously perhaps, a play on texture and text. The numerous sartorial transformations emphasise the linguistic symbiosis between the signifier and the signified. They illustrate the illusion of dressing up meaning in a variety of different words: synonyms contain as much shadow as similarity. A habitual belief in the use of synonyms is one that implies a subservience to a thought-directed practicality of language that runs the risk of degrading linguistic sensitivity; of which Muldoon's poetic language cannot be accused of doing.

All the G-names of 'The More a Man Wants' have larger associations too. Is Gallogly an agent in Girard's structures of violence, 'an Oglala Sioux busily tracing the family tree of an Ulsterman who had some hand in the massacre of Wounded Knee' (48)? Is he the terrorist behind the U.D.R. corporal's death by 'a single high-velocity shot' (49), the youth 'whose face is masked by the seamless black stocking filched from his mum' (52)? Is he an English agent under cover, the grass in question of the multisemantic admonitions: '*Keep off the Grass*' (43)? Is he an alphabetic construction deployed by Muldoon to terrorise the poetics of Heaney? As an unchecked blood-feud in a sectarian society where the cause for schismogenesis seems long gone, Muldoon's revenge tale runs parallel to Girard's structuralist theories of mimetic desire and scapegoating.[40] All the aliases of the poem's main character predict that he could be an agent for several agencies and movements. The way in which Gallogly runs through drug-infested city streets, the difficult pronunciation of '*Sheugh*' (49) together with the image of girls 'hog-tied to the chapel gates' (43), all provide evidence of Muldoon's terrorising of Heaney's sober and rural settings; particularly his

40 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Continuum, [1972] 2005); René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Walter Burket, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

'Broagh' in *Wintering Out*, and the violence to young girls in 'Punishment' in *North*. '*Keep of the Grass*' also contains a warning to refrain from pastoralism, organicist poetics, atatavistic fertility rites and *chthonic* rootedness.[41] Gallogly also crosses other textual borders. In his mercurial identities and in the significance of the letter g to his names, and in his drives of desire, political machinations and experimental figuration, the main character runs in companionship with John Berger's Booker-prize-winning *G*. Gallowglass and his many stolen robes recall, of course, *Macbeth*, and that play's portrayal of civil war in the eleventh century, and its redefining of the colonial relations between England and Scotland when the play was performed for King James I shortly after he was nearly killed by the Catholic conspiracy of Guy Fawkes in 1605.

In his perpetual differences, more from his former states of self than from any others, Gallogly embodies polymorphic selves, the transient and dialectical contrary to a static and unified concept of identity – the sense of several selves in movement that cannot be assimilated into any stasis or unity of identitarian thinking. But, as a character moving through multiple margins of different contexts, Gallogly does not begin to 'suffer an identity crisis' as Kendall suggests, he results from a prison house of language, and from numerous discourses that are internally contradictory.[42] Within these constrictions Gallogly flows freely as an incoercible character that subsumes and produces new meaning without being arrested by any unitarian discourse or totalitarian context – a fantastic phenomenon which is only realisable in poetry and fiction, drama and art. Or perhaps it is not ultimately realisable, as the concluding implosion of characters, names, intertextuality and discourses in the final implosion suggests: 'Huh' (64).

Linguistic variety and vertiginous intertextuality compose, tranceform, decompose, dis/continue the worlds in which the metamorphosing Gallogly moves. 'Quartz,' 'aquarium,' 'quorum,' 'Quinze,' 'quarrel,' 'quim,' 'Queen's,' 'quad,' 'quibble,' 'Algonquin' and 'quiff' (40–62) are some of the quacks and qualities that belong to the quarters of *quoof*. Just as extraordinary are the poem's verbs, many of which create the linguistic equivalent of cartoon effects: 'skeddadled,' 'hammer,' 'skite up,' 'screeches off,' 'hared,' 'rattles,' 'plonk,' 'spluttering,' 'gobbles,' 'skids' 'squats,' 'dickering,' 'lopes,' 'noses round' (40–58). Furthermore, the verses live by quotations from Shakespeare, Heaney, Hamsun, Huxley and

41 Despite their obvious and well-documented friendship and high regard for one another, Muldoon's reservations about Heaney's bog poems is no secret. He includes none of them in his edition of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986). For explicit critique of Heaney's poetry by Muldoon, see for example his review of *Station Island* and *Sweeney Astray* 'Sweaney Peregraine,' *London Review of Books* 6, no. 20 (1984), 20–22.

42 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 110.

Carroll in addition to folk songs and the visual art of Hopper, Pollock and Picasso. Intertextuality in these lines extends beyond phonovisual pyrotechnics and ekphrastic enactments to engage with a medium that fits the contortions of this terrorist tale like shells in shotguns. A (self-)critical observation by Muldoon defines other differential motions of the poem's languages and techniques:

> I suppose another way of describing it would be "cinematic" or "quick cutting." In a longer poem you simply cannot go at a lick right the way through. You've got to have variety in the pace or else it's a runaway horse. Or it's boring. And one way to vary the pace is to move in for a close up of a detail and quick cut back to the central story.[43]

Transpositions of storylines from films to poems occur throughout Muldoon's textual adventures.[44] Here, an infinite number of action films, as well as their quintessential element, the chase, propel this paralogical pageturner. Cinematography lends colour to its very visual quality, and enhances the poem's self-conscious status as a metafictional construct that has relinquished most representational concerns. But the filmic drives more than sight, sound and story: the film editing techniques Muldoon has utilised in his twelve years of experience with the BBC, together with his wider cinema interests, inform the employment of subplot, the abrupt shifts, digressions, time manipulation and geographical leaps in the poem. A film director could hardly emulate the pace, punch and plots of these multiple and mind-boggling stories. Techniques from

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43 Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 81.

44 Hitchcock, Leone and Nelson's films contributed to poems in *New Weather*. Jofffé's *The Mission* suggests itself in 'The Lass of Aughrim' (*MTB*, 15), while in 'The Misfits' (*MSG*, 9) John Houston's film of 1961 is implicated, and of course bears the same title as Muldoon's poem with a storyline that concerns endangered horses and subcultures based on Arthur Miller's short story. 'The Weepies' (*WBL*, 11) records the impact of a sentimental film on young boys. Cinematographic techniques direct many of Muldoon's multinarrative poems, e.g. in the artistic self-editing in 'Ontario' (*MTB*, 1) and the cross-cutting and multiple story-lines that contend for ascendancy in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' (*H*, 109–140). Muldoon has reviewed *Cinema and Ireland* by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, and several Hollywood block-busters. See 'The Irish at the Odeon,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 25–31 March 1988, 325–326; 'Barbie, but No Bimbo. Review of Pocahontas by Disney,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 October 1995, 21; 'Big Hair. Review of *The Last of the Mohicans*,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1992, 17; 'Western Ways. Review of *Dances with Wolves* by Kevin Costner,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 February 1991, 21. Muldoon's cinematopoeia is in need of new research, as is his use of ekphrasis.

film augment the alterrative dimensions of 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants.'

A breath-taking narrative propulsion, for all its disruptions and diversions, adds speed and suspense to this multilinguistic sonnet cycle. The 'renewed interest in narrative' that Morrison and Motion identify, familiar from Muldoon's Byronic propensities in *Why Brownlee Left*, is best defined by John Kerrigan in his review of *Quoof*.[45] Kerrigan's condensation of Genette's theories and French nouveau roman narrativity – luminously mirrored in Franco-Irish writing in Beckett's *Trilogy* – offers the following definition of the tendency in such writing to move away from plot, continuity, character development and unity of meaning:

> Reflexive, aleatory and cornucopian, the New Narrative deploys its fragmented and ramifying fictions to image the unpredictability of life, and its continuous shadowing of What Might Be.[46]

This definition not only describes incisively the predominant characteristics of 'The More a Man Wants,' it also indicates how Muldoon's poetics arises from recent shifts in the conception of human existence from epistemological quest and ontological contemplation to inscriptions of an unknown future.[47] 'A shadowing of what might be' has been present in Muldoon's poetry from the alterity of the very first poem 'The Electric Orchard' and the uncanny italicisation of *New Weather* to the actualisations of the death of his living father in several early volumes and the possibility of unbirth in *Why Brownlee Left*. It assumes new conceptualisations in his many poems to come on unrealised possibilities, for example the unfolding of his father's journey to Australia which never took place in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' (*H*, 109–140). The imaginative and counter-factual qualities of Muldoon's narrative streak frequently canvass the unrealised, whether in life or death, or, as in this particular poem, the states of mind and society when life and death and the real and the unreal seem blurred and otiose. However, the alterrative here clearly corresponds to his own Chandleresque 'Immram' in the previous volume, and to the hegemony of the Troubles thrillers as the most common mode of literary representation

45 Morrison and Motion, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, 12.

46 Kerrigan, 'The New Narrative,' 22.

47 For an account of this shift in contemporary fiction, see Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* (London: Methuen, 1984); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

of Northern Ireland.[48] Thus, Muldoon's disintegrative poetic narrative gathers energy and force by challenging and crossing previous poetic idioms and other literary and non-literary genres. The poetic language of 'The More a Man Has' derives much from its immersion in the very traditions the verses simultaneously strive to splice, undermine and renew.

Naturally, this combination of rapidity alongside the use of meditative poetic form in what is a narrative *sonnet* cycle presents an odd couple. The use of sonnets juxtaposes the narrative drive with the quintessential poetic form of discontinuous lyrical fragments, *rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, to create tensions within the text. As the sonnets interact with the tailspin of the narrative of which they are constituent, they also dissolve from within. An italicised minimalist meltdown of fragmented verses – a quotation of undecidable origin, a simulation of a tradition of which no original exists – in a fourteen word sonnet exemplifies a typical Muldonic alterrative:

> *Just*
> *throw*
> *him*
> *a*
> *cake*
> *of*
> *Sunlight*
> *soap,*
> *let*
> *him*
> *wash*
> *him-*
> *self*
> *ashore.* (62)

48 In a range from the commercial and conservative to the artistic and challenging, the combination of Troubles, political collusion, crime, mystery and suspense informs the fiction of Brian Moore, Danny Morrison, Keith Baker, Tom Clancy, Stuart Neville, Ian McDonald, Benedict Kiely, Colin Bateman, Robert McLiam Wilson, Eoin McNamee and many more. The genre, or variations on it, is also fundamental to fiction after the Good Friday Agreement, for example in the novels of Tim Park. For two analytical surveys of the genre, see Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969* (London: Ashgate, 2005); Patrick Magee, *Gangsters or Guerillas? Representations of Irish Republicans in 'Troubles Fiction'* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2002).

Has a more cut-back minimalist sonnet ever been written? *Italicette* or *stanzonette* could be proposed as terms for this poetic novelty. In its obvious metatextual questioning of what makes a sonnet a sonnet, this minimalism retains the number fourteen as the bottom line. Its extreme reductionism actually extends the convention's thematic and technical demands considerably – the smaller room, the greater wit – and this linguistic segment perpetuates and plays the genre's premises. The serioludic stanzonette attends to a soul *in extremis* – at sea, possibly drowning – but the point of view belongs to a disengaged observer, a perspective that imbues the humour with cynicism. Funny and fatal, the note rings with the sardonic detachment of much of Muldoon's poetry, and the inescapable irony that defines much of our age. A repetitive use of the objective form of the third person personal pronoun and the parallel reflexive pronoun – '*him*,' '*him*,' '*him-self*,' conducts in identical rhymes a confluence of individual and linguistic identity that reinforces our sense of the poetic object's helplessness and the absent subject's disavowal of responsibility. This iteration of masculinity also exchanges the traditional afflatus of a celestial muse and the idealisation of an unattainable lady for homoerotic currencies, and does so with slippery humour. The verses turn at midstream. The volta does not shift the drift, but the apparent grammatical balance slants towards the latter independent clause in a symbolic transference of syntactic significance to the self-help of the unfortunate party. '*Sun*,' '*soap*,' '*self*,' '*ashore*' flow beyond alliteration to sound Muldoon's subtle aural harmonics. '*Sunlight soap*' deprives platonic metaphors of light of any sublime sense and metaphysical quality in its manifestation of the supreme form of materialism in our age: a commercial for a highly profitable product of daily consumption. Ideas of cleansing are drowned in waves of secular and quotidian chores. The vocabulary is colloquial – *de vulgaris eloquentia*. Italicisation, an established style of citation, possibly indicates a cut from a commercial jingle or simply a humorous joke, or it might refer the readers to intertextual depths that may not exist – a prank on academic text-trawling. After all, Shakespeare, Huxley, Hamsun and Muldoon among others, and a hedge-sparrow, are quoted *verbatim* in other stanzas of the poem. Possibly, the *stanzette* torpedoes the hope of delivery in the Afro-American gospel hymn 'Michael row the boat ashore.' Decisively, this *italicette* – a self-stylised and accurate construct of reference without sources in a minimalist sonnet of linguistic play and sagacity – creates a striking point of resistance to the intense intertextuality of the sequence in which it appears. A quasi-denial of its own artistic procedures, this superlinguistic site illuminates its own textual artifice in contradiction to habitual creative allusiveness and, for example, Eliot's citational infrastructure. Italicisation indicates the

author's hypertextual distancing from his own verses; inversely, the technique links the verse with other detached statements, for example the accidental italicisation of the first Faber edition of *New Weather*, the italicised fifth stanza of 'Gathering Mushrooms' in *Quoof* and the italicised titles in 'Pancho Villa' in *Mules*, many texts in *Madoc*, italicised snips and snippets in volumes to come, and the ostentatious *de-italicised* citations of commands in 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' (MSG, 73–90). Evocative and affecting, Muldoon's artistic use of italics in *Quoof* might take its cue from a technological cock-up, from texts that may or may not exist, from iteration itself, from a multitude of ideas about the particular linguistic feature of italicization *per se*.

If Muldoon's *italicette*, however, is superficial, it nevertheless shows and sounds the profound despair and apathy of the grave situation in Northern Ireland. The anorectic slenderness of this italicette configures a formalist analogue to the paramilitary hunger strikers in the Maze, and to the contemporary psychiatric and nutritional disease, *anorexia*. Its innovative undermining of an already flexible but set poetic form, the sonnet, spurs socio-formal interpretation that does not diminish the poetic preciousness; rather it increases its value. Consequently, this luminous example of technical brilliance and colloquial 'craic' – an illusory *reduction ad absurdum* – invites interpretations of a much wider individual, social and political significance. Muldoon's poetic language generates sincere concerns; it does not obfuscate or detract from them, as so many critics have suggested. In all its alterity and linguistic signifiance, this italicette presents another instance of Muldonic alterrative, the alternatives of flux and fluidity in times and places where the fixed and the formed have led to extreme situations.

The number of Muldonic sonnets in the final climax, forty-nine, is probably determined by the Winnebago trickster legend, an ethnodistant template that also allows for Gallogly's many transfigurations and resurrections and all the fantastical elements of the disjointed narrative alternatives. Tricks and transmogrifications also draw attention to the text's solipsistic artificiality and alterity as much as they play out in poetic form the estranged aspects of eschatology and disfigurment of self and society in Northern Ireland and other contested regions:

> A hole in the heart, an ovarian
> cyst.
> Coming up the Bann
> in a bubble.
> Disappearing up his own bum. (47)

When his cock rattles its sabre
he takes it in his dab
hand, plants one chaste kiss
on its forelock,
and then, with a birl and a skirl,
tosses it off like a caber. (48)

The poem ends in an explosion:

It was this self-same pump attendant
who dragged the head and torso
clear
and mouthed an Act of Contrition
in the frazzled ear
and overheard
those already-famous last words
Moose…Indian.
'Next of all wus the han'.' 'Be Japers.'
'The sodgers cordonned-off the area
wi' what-ye-may-call-it tape.'
'Lunimous.' 'They foun' this hairy
han' wi' a drowned man's grip
on a lunimous stone no bigger than a …
'Huh.' (64)

'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' conceptualises new modes of being and expression in madcap language and wayward narration that chart the movements of a differentiated self towards death and destruction. These verses attempt to articulate the frequently incomprehensible and unspeakable in a beast of a poem, in a radically darkened art, that constitutes the cracked mirror of art held up to a surrounding society in Northern Ireland of chaos, death and destruction. An aftermath of an unspeakable act of terrorism defines the corporeality and the political implications of the plot, but this is also an annihilation of text and language: 'Huh.' The disjointed narrative meets a dead end in a violated sonnet. Intertextual debris – from Henry Thoreau's famous last words, 'moose' and 'Indian,' to Elisabeth Bishop's 'The Moose' and Robert Frost's 'The Vanishing Red' and 'Directive' – is strewn all over the place. The drowned man alludes to the previous italicette and the severed hand recalls the bloody colonisation myth of the Red Hand of Ulster, the preceding 'The Hands' and possibly Dr. Jekyll's discovery of Mr. Hyde's hairy hands.

Failures of language, the misutterance of 'lunimous' and the utter inarticulation of 'Huh,' conclude the poem.

The end enacts a linguistic disintegration and a textual dissolution which convey all the more the themes of terror, death and destruction. The testing and dissolution of poetic language and form in 'The More a Man Has' signal its own concern with the possibilities and impossibilities of language to communicate the actuality of individual suffering, internecine savagery and social disorder. Its precise inarticulations question the relations of habitual rhetoric and affirmative language to crisis, tragedy and loss, and run in tandem with Ardono's engagement with the impossibilities of poetic language in the stern face of genocide, and with the general post-structuralist questioning of language's ability to represent. This probing of language's abilities and disabilities, its capacity to render the horrors of violence and death, actually accentuates the poem's serious engagement with matters of terror, violence and war. In this respect, the speedy sonnet cycle echoes the opening poem, 'Gathering Mushrooms.' The final poem's evocation of a society in crisis counteracts the first poem's escapist levity, and responds deviously to the call of its final stanza, '*Come back to us*' (9). The phantasmagoric nightmare of the final poem possibly results from the first poem's drug-induced state of mind. Italicisation and reiterations also connect the two poems by intralinguistic means, a technique which also is relevant to a much wider framework of Muldoon's poetry and other texts – whether poetic, literary, visual, filmic or musical.

In all its alienation and undecidability, *Quoof* – the title, the poem, the word – communicates before it is understood, but spurs a semiosis that is not easily defined, contained or explained. Curious, queer and contentious, an alphabetic beast that recalls Muldoon's own 'Hedgehog' as much as the yeti, the feminine, the erotic, the quizzical and the poetic, this linguistic term highlights language as the main character on the stage of poetics. It draws attention to the significance of itself, of the word and of the singular letters, and it serves as a synecdoche for the alphabetic scrupulosity, the syntactic scrutiny, and the grammatical permutations and interrogations of form Muldoon undertakes and deploys in this volume. All its unknowability and questioning of language relate ambiguously to the questions and processes of self and society, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, and their concomitant poetic creations and critical discourses. The intractable language of Muldoon's poetry precedes his apprehensive subject matters and prompts heterogeneous hermeneutic engagement.

CHAPTER 5

Meeting the British

The blurb on the back cover of *Meeting the British* informs the reader that the volume includes 'an account of the first recorded case of germ warfare.' The statement refers to how the British finally crushed Pontiac's rebellion and tried to wipe out the Ottawa Indians by injecting smallpox into the population during the French-English-Amerindian wars in the unsettled borderlands of Canada and America in the 1760s. Such a cynical design of genocide constitutes a terrifying part of *Meeting the British* and language plays no innocent role. Adorno's vision of a radically darkened art was prompted to a large extent by the horrors and holocaust of World War Two. The conspiracy of genocide of Amerindians in Muldoon's fifth volume of poetry runs in alignment with Adorno's insights. Ethnic eradication and cultural annihilation belong to the monstrous side of humanity. Muldoon's account of the murderous plan also gives the lie to ideas of language as translucent, neutral, innocent, and representational. 'Meeting the British' lays bare the prior investments, power dynamics, dissembling, and Machiavellian potential of apparently objective communication.

Encounters with the British are manifold in the volume, and not all dark, and the same spectrum of malignancy is reflected in the combined felicities and dysfunctions of language. The language of *Meeting the British* explores syntactic solutions, and the contextual relationality for which language is a kind of expressive interface or communicative medium. Muldoon's first three volumes thrive on a language of auto-critical in-formations, subjective correlatives and bi-located socio-political introspection. *Quoof* displays generative alphabetics replete with the artifice and autonomous life of letters and words, and a transfiguration of narrative and form that allows for a collage of temporality and textuality. This volume brings into focus the larger circles of language within which his innovations have their being. A slide in significance towards larger units of syntax and meaning does not signal a rupture with his former array of startling linguistics; far from it, they remain an integral part of his poetic palette in this volume too, and in those to come. *Meeting the British* can be viewed as a very ambiguous title that announces confrontation and conciliation where previous titles suggest alterations, liminalities, departures and a full gamut of enigmatic modulations. Interrelations between the British and the Irish, as between the British and so many other nations of the world, America included, have shaped the historical development, social engineering, aesthetic

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preferences and cognitive contours of both islands for centuries. That this meeting is not only linguistic is an obvious fact that the volume acknowledges, but these poems certainly accentuate the interactions of language across cultures. In Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1987, the title entered a discursive field and a very real situation of historical conflict, political controversy, divided societies and abhorrent violence of such magnitude and ferocity that the sectarian divisions appeared insuperable at the time.[1] In his characteristic manner, Muldoon does not endorse the rhetoric of nationality, whether English or Irish, or that of communal bias or simplistic separatism, as one strand of the title reveals. British, as opposed to English, not only designates populations with whom the Irish might have more in common than with the English – the Scots and the Welsh and all the Americans of British extraction, the term also denotes the Gaelic element of the ancient Britons, the pre-Roman European invaders into both Great Britain and Ireland. *Meeting the British*, then, signifies inherited multicultural traces that are mutable, constituting a nexus of self and other that cannot be reduced to unitary ideas of origin, history, identity and representation. In Ireland and Northern Ireland, the title struck a raw nerve in the commotion caused by the Anglo-Irish Agreement that was signed on 15 November 1985 at Hillsborough Castle by the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald. Negotiation, as the title implies, is one of the dominant metaphors in the volume and it comes as no surprise that the many meetings with the British occur on a large geo-historical scale. Nor is it surprising that the aesthetic, cultural, poetic and linguistic dimensions of the many accounts of meeting the British must overcome the dangers of militant and political confrontation, and it is to be expected that the many meetings and negotiations in the volume extend to the realm of death. The volume is dedicated to Patrick Muldoon, Paul Muldoon's father, and it includes elegies for dead relatives and friends. Death and destruction also extend to culture and language. Still, in its language contact and crossings of cultures, the volume demonstrates the complexity of a language that can never be aligned absolutely with ideas of intentionality, communication and consequence – a language that articulates its themes of encounters and negotiations. Language in *Meeting the British* continuously alters itself and the realities with which it negotiates.

1 'I begin with a question to which I have no answer. Why do so many people hate the British? I say "British," but what they actually hate is England and the English.' Uttered in *The Belfast Telegraph* as late as 2010, these words of Kevin Myers reflect some of the mood the title confronts.

'Ontario,' the first quizzical prose poem, designates the region in which the germ warfare of the 'Meeting the British' takes place, and introduces this collection with what is evidently a premeditated disorientation of whatever type of language, poetic form and location a poetry volume entitled *Meeting the British* would tend to elicit or might be expected to elicit. 'Ontario' dispels intriguingly most of the title's initial connotations, just as 'The Mixed Marriage' defied customary expectations in *Mules*. Ontario designates a river, a lake, towns and cities on the American continent in addition to the most obvious designation, the Canadian province that was once the homeland of the Algonquian and Iroquoian indigenous people. Yet the first verse cites Pennsylvania. Consequently, any potential meeting with the British is deflected away from Ireland, Northern Ireland or England to an uncertain number of unspecified places on a continent that is now multicultural, where the British once suppressed the native population while, at the same time, the British pioneers liberated themselves from England. Parallels with potentially coercive elements in liberation movements back home are clear. In the manner the persona in 'Ontario' possibly approaches the evil from which he appears to escape – he could be a courier and his brother's petrochemical knowhow could be part of the armed struggle in Northern Ireland – and attempts to reshape his life with artistic procedures as language fails to account for his experience, this initial piece sets down the volume's themes, styles and concerns. Who is or are British in the poem? The persona? His brother? The girl? None of them or all of them? How do we know? Does it matter? What does it mean to be British? For all the relevance these questions might have had on the feuding interfaces of certain districts in Belfast at the time of the volume's publication, the introductory poem is bent on drawing readers' attention away from the obvious claustrophobic and conflictual line of thought the title suggests in Northern Ireland.

In 'Ontario,' Muldoon sets up humorous, auto-critical points of departure for his own artistic methods in a volume that will reach its apex in the centre of New York in the final poem, '7, Middagh Street.' Engagement with Irish-British relations from a distance, and the structuring of a volume around an initial self-questioning stylometric disclaimer and a final intriguing climax, are well-established trademarks in Muldoon's poetry by now. The initial and the final poem reveal how *Meeting the British* extends – spatially and temporally – perspectives on Northern Ireland previously found in Muldoon's poetry. Festive and meta-aesthetic, these two poems also provide a relatively peaceful and highly cultured ambience for the presentation of brutality and violence in many of the other poems. Such preoccupations – origin, identity, war and peace – are also framed and formed by the negotiations of, in and with language in the poems.

'Are you for real?' (1), a girl searching for her lost contact-lens asks her philosophical-minded aid-of-the minute in the Park Plaza disco in 'Ontario,' in a tone and with a comic lack of vision that recall the hallucinogenic inducement, nocturnal urbanity and dubious sexual encounters in previous volumes. With humour and irony the quip also pricks the membrane of the real and the imaginary, and questions the quirks and perks of Muldoon's quizzical mind, and his way with language. A multirelational question in a personal conversation in an unexpected location rendered in what is conventionally regarded as an unpoetic genre, prose, initiates the heuristic tone of linguistic self-scrutiny and self-reflexive artistry by which the diversity of cultural encounters in the collection are framed. The strobe-light tête-à-tête counterpoints a previous moment of meditative solitude that considers representation and semiotic divisibility:

> The
> constellations of the northern hemisphere were picked
> out in luminous paint on the ceiling. I lay under a
> comforting, phosphorescent Plough, thinking about
> where the Plough stopped being the plough and became the
> Big Dipper. (1)

In a slanted Romantic frame and with a plethora of star metaphors, which include Muldoon's own, particularly the ones in *Mules*, this sublunary nocturne does not provide solace or instantiate existential meditation; rather, it provokes a linguistic conundrum. What is at issue is how language refers to natural phenomena, and how the choice of words transforms our conception of them. Musings on the functions of language also preside over the conversation between the two potential dance partners: ' – Did you know that Spinoza was a lens-grinder?' '– A lens, I went on, is really a lentil. A pulse. Her back was an imponderable, green furrow in the ultraviolet strobe' (1–2). The persona's erudite semi-etymological knowledge appears ridiculous and incomprehensible to the girl in this serio-comic exchange and the quasi-etymological tracing seems to give inadequate grounds for the conflation of organic seeds and technological equipment, and offers no help in metropolitan parlance. The leap from Spinoza's lens to the pulse of adolescent excitement, throbbing rhythm and flashing strobe lights indicates the ability on Muldoon's part to shake ordinary logic and reason with a creative wave of the wand, using the contingency and play that the dance of language offers. In exchanging the abstract for the concrete, the girl's impatient riposte brings him down to earth from his lofty philosophising: ' – Did you know that Yonge's Street's the longest street in the

world?' ' – Well, it starts a thousand miles to the north, and it ends right here' (2). Direction is hardly accidental here: The road leads *from* the North. The remark ends the conversation and the prose piece. As the conversation is a recollection stemming from the last time he visited his brother, the ending is subsumed within his nocturnal reminiscing, a 'rerun of my own dream-visions' (1), visions on the verge of violence that are clearly also a rerun of many previous poems. As a cliché for the mental processes at the moment of dying, the filmic rerun also intimates death. The insomniac's anamnesis takes the shape of cinematic presentation more than psychological analysis, and this technique of projection and its associated vocabulary – 'rerun,' 'flashed up,' 'close-up,' 'slo-mo,' 'freeze-frame' (1) – assumes a mode of artificial transformation and linguistic fluidity by which many of the biographical and historical aspects of the volume are articulated. 'Ontario' negotiates the expectations of how the encounters with the British will unfold in the volume by negotiating its own language and syntax.

If the introductory poem militates against any obvious ideas of encounters between the British and any other nation, the volume's central cluster of poems, 'Meeting the British,' 'Crossing the Line' and 'Bechbretha,' enable the titular theme to be developed through accumulative alternatives. They all enact cultural confrontations which play themselves out through linguistic negotiations. Like the majority of the poems in the volume, 'Meeting the British' is historically grounded in a specific time and place. Yet its language proposes and disposes. As the title designates both the volume and a singular poem within it, it thus signifies simultaneously both a totality and an instance of that totality. Because the totality also comprehends many other poems that differ considerably from the title poem, this specific poem reflects and refracts the totality at the same time. *Meeting the British* and 'Meeting the British' unsettle distinct delineations of origins, centres and language. Thus, the play on titles and their conditional status in governing some of the volume's meaning, could be seen to reflect the geographical status of Northern Ireland as a separate state within and without the islands of Ireland and England. Destabilisations of semantic stability also inhere in the poem. Nine half-rhymed and assonantal couplets are set on the American continent more than 250 years ago and they cover a meeting of several populations with the English. They recount from the viewpoint of the Ottawa Indians how the British finally crushed Pontiac's rebellion in the 1760s by employing what the blurb calls 'the first recorded case of germ warfare.' It is a history of trade, war and shifting sides among the many Indian people under Pontiac's command at a time when France and England were conducting a colonial race for the Indians' land. As the Ottawa Indians lived in Michigan and Southern Ontario, the poem visits one of the other possible sites of the opening prose piece, but the encounter with the British

this time, more than two centuries earlier, highlights colonial cynicism, culturecide and genocide:

> We met the British in the dead of winter.
> The sky was lavender
>
> and the snow lavender-blue.
> I could hear, far below,
>
> the sound of two streams coming together
> (both were frozen over)
>
> and, no less strange,
> myself calling out in French
>
> across that forest-
> clearing. Neither General Jeffrey Amherst
>
> nor Colonel Henry Bouquet
> could stomach our willow-tobacco.
>
> As for the unusual
> scent when the Colonel shook out his hand-
>
> kerchief: *C'est la lavande,*
> *une fleur mauve comme le ciel.*
>
> They gave us six fishhooks
> and two blankets embroidered with smallpox. (16)

The cynical design of genocide in this poem is terrifying and language plays no innocent part. Just as Romantic patterns of nature imagery and of the unknown are rendered menacing by affectation and xenophobia in these verses, these lines also cry foul with naïve understandings of language. Indications of cultural unification by the confluence of the two streams are shattered by linguistic and ritual alienation as 'bouquet' designates not flowers but a Swiss officer in the English army, the Amerindian negotiator becomes estranged to himself by adopting French as a spurious *lingua franca*, and the peace pipe becomes a token of aggravation and contention. Deferral of meaning in 'hand- / kerchief' displaces any cordial handshake with a solipsistic gesture. This spectacular enjambment mimics corporeal dismemberment and interjects a

sardonic irony that reinforces the poem's callous mood and sense of division. The poem testifies to the role of language in the massacre and possible extermination of Indian populations for the sake of colonial conquest: 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian.' Imperialist suppression by the English of the natives on two different continents is implied. In this respect, the particular meeting with the British relates to the discourses of history, politics and language in Ireland and Northern Ireland too. The poem provides an analogue to standard nationalist accounts of Irish history, and to the situation in Northern Ireland, as endless rapacious exploitation, shrewd systematic suppression and unscrupulous eradication of Irish language, culture and population by the merciless and inhuman English. On the other hand, the Amerinidian setting of the poem constitutes a critique of any political rhetoric delimited by its own time and location, rhetoric which might risk self-aggrandisement in its unchecked accounts of victimisation. This continues Muldoon's method of presenting the Irish Troubles through the tragic fates of native Amerindians that he first made use of in 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' (*NW*, 44–47), employed again in more oblique terms in 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' (*Q*, 40–64), and further develop in the debacle of Romanticism and Western metaphysics in the next volume, *Madoc*.[2] Muldoon's Amerindian analogues to the immediate realities of fraught Anglo-Irish relations during the Troubles, and to the longer view of relationships between Ireland and Britain, remain active and acute.

Interestingly, in *The Haw Lantern* Heaney also produced a poem that attends to the negotiations of the many frontiers of land and language in the same year, 1987. His search for solutions in 'Terminus' retains a hope of uncontested ground in Northern Ireland where neutral mediation is possible:

> Two buckets were easier carried than one.
> I grew up in between
> [...]
> Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
> When I stood on the central stepping stone
>
> I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
> Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.[3]

2 For Muldoon's critical engagement with popularisations of Indian history and culture, see 'Western Ways. Review of *Dances with Wolves* by Kevin Costner,' 21; 'Big Hair. Review of *The Last of the Mohicans*,' 17; 'Barbie, but No Bimbo. Review of Pocahontas by Disney.'

3 Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 5.

Muldoon's poem tends to problematise such optimistic ideas of mediation through bilingualism or lingua franca to bridge these types of watershed divisions. First of all, in 'Meeting the British,' the parley is played out in the paradoxes of the supplementary double. Whatever language the go-between in the middle of the two sides chooses, he would always be implicated in the complexities of representation and supplementation. The go-between in Muldoon's poem takes the general's place but can never be his equal. This process of substitution parallels the problems of linguistic representation and supplementarity in general. Illusions of objectivity and universality are always predicated upon the logic of power and the discourses of the powerful. The socio-historical context of most languages is concentric: language tends to gravitate towards the centres of powers (those of religion, patriarchy, urban agglomerations and capital cities, empire) whenever used, however much this might be an imposed set of terms upon its very character. It becomes impossible to resort to the concept of a freight-less language, a neutral and weightless language that keeps the balance between invested powers. Any promotion of any individual or any language to the status of objectivity and neutrality is illusory because these notions are always already re-inscribed in specific national, cultural and linguistic definitions of the term. An uncontested subscription to assumed commonalities of language would automatically fall in favour of the powerful. Under such conditions, a negotiator's ignorance of his own double position and the status of the adopted language of negotiation could easily be reduced to a useful instrument for the powerful. Even if the negotiations were not a cynical sham predetermined by malevolent imperialist politics – as they so evidently are in this poem – any sublation of language from its government would already have tilted the scales. In this case, of course, French is not a neutral medium of communication – it is a result of and an instrument of colonial politics. Consequently, the native go-between is not an innocent negotiator, nor an unknowing betrayer, but already a linguistic hostage of the invaders as the parley is already structured by the (linguistic) powers of a European parliament. The supposedly neutral negotiations carried out in an objective language are actually governed by the culture of one of the interested parties. Secondly, triangular relations in Muldoon's poem problematise the issues of negotiation beyond the simplicities of two-party talks, and introduce the problematic position of the third party: the other other. Several nations, cultures and languages are involved in the negotiations in this poem: a representative of several indigenous American peoples negotiate in French with the English over their homeland, which is a battlefield for the imperial politics of France and England. The presentation in the poem of this trilateral power-struggle by carefully paired couplets anticipates on a formal level the exclusion of any third party: the poetic form reveals a contract of exclusion of any third

entity. At best, the Indian peoples are represented in the sole language of one of the colonial powers, but the lack of any native vocabulary in the poem indicates the complete silencing of the Indians. In an Irish and Northern Irish context, these underlying binary strictures hint at all the minority interests – those of immigrant minorities, marginalised social groups, gender disparities and sexual minorities, etc. – that are excluded in binary discourses. The implications of this language lesson range wide: in a larger perspective of philosophy, the poem illustrates forcefully the exclusivist strictures of Hegelian dynamics. 'Meeting the British' also contains other sinister contextual implications. Its strong sense of perfidy and treason prefigure the succeeding poems, 'Crossing the Line,' in which the negotiations of 'two rival commanders' are encased by numerous discourses, and the subsequent 'Bechbretha.'

'Crossing the Line' appears as the volume's prismatic poem. In its obvious reflexivity and its subject matter and form, this multifractured sonnet reflects the different concerns of the volume and reinforces Muldoon's central concerns with language. The poem enmeshes in its five phrases the prose, technostrobic ambience and dialectics of the opening poem 'Ontario,' and anticipates the meta-aesthetic disputation and the splitting, splicing and staging of sonnets in the last long text, '7, Middagh Street.' It appears as the centre of three poems preoccupied with negotiation, a theme that stretches from the personal encounter in the first prose poem 'Ontario' to the many elegies for his late father, and to the balancing of aesthetic perspectives in the final series of ventriloquised monologues in '7, Middagh Street.' In fact, as number thirteen of twenty-four poems, the poem also occupies numerologically the central place – on page seventeen, the same page number as 'Quoof' in the previous collection. In its egregiously disjunctive syntax, calculated incoherence and uncompromising opacity, many of the lines, and their form, not only enact the problematic procedures of negotiations, but also those of language itself. The poem has received little critical attention.

A windswept gallery. With its telephones
down and the jiggery-pokery
of *Quantel*
dissolving in the monitors.

§ § §

Two rival commanders
are dining by candle-
light on medallions of young peccary.

§ § §

Like synchronised dolphins,
their flunkeys
hand each a napkin
torn from the script of a seven-part series
based on the *Mabinogion*.

§ § §

Where Pryderi's gifts of hounds and horses
turn out to have been fungus. (17)

'Crossing the Line,' as the fragmented verses above make clear, is an evident renovation of a cliché. Muldoon is not averse to using clichés and popular idioms, as can be seen from his wide-ranging colloquial register, his involvement with Western and detective and pulp fiction genres, and, not least, his long-standing and enthusiastic engagement with popular music. 'Clichés are clichés for very good reasons. There's a hell of a lot in them,' he argues convincingly.[4] Readers of Muldoon's poem will recognise in the clichéd title 'Crossing the Line' a medley of connotations including: communal bifurcation, military frontiers, naval navigation, national boundaries, technological mischance, moral righteousness and perfidious betrayal that pertain to the rival commanders' situation, but the first lines to be crossed in this poem are those of language and literature. A truncated, verbless, three-word first sentence violates syntactic completion and divides the initial line, as if to cut short communication from the very start. This first indefinite and modified singular noun, 'a windswept gallery,' is of uncertain grammar: is it a subject or an object, or does the unit serve a complementary, adjectival or adverbial function? Indeterminacy is suggested in this syntactic structure which instills a sense of stasis, reticence and partition relevant to the theme of negotiation. Solid stanzaic severance and obvious signs of separation in the first Faber edition (in this book replaced by three asterisks) augment the delineation of these anomalous characteristics. These self-contained but defective syntactic segments capture the communicative deficiencies of the two interlocutors, and the incoherence, discontinuity and displacements of serialised negotiations in several venues over long stretches of time. The signs of separation between the stanzas draw attemtion to what is written between the lines, and hint at symbolic codes and paragraphs of law and contract. Additionally, the text divides into further segments with decorative spacing emblems simulating the style a menu – appropriate to a gastronomic agenda of food and wine, cutting deals and

4 Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 83.

carving filets. This gastronomic affectation in public politics serves as a reminder of how trivial social etiquette can impinge on important talks. Similarly, these emblems of division, together with the separation of the second tercet from the first de-metricised quatrain, serve to disrupt temporal relationships to suggest difference and distance between the two commanders themselves, and between them and the windswept gallery. It is not unlikely that these negotiators are two TV-combatants who appear at a remove from themselves, dining by candlelight somewhere else while being spectators to their own television performance: negotiations take place in different venues and on different levels. The bi-focality here indicates the difference between public rhetoric and individual conversation. But there is a sinister application too: the two negotiators share a secret agenda and the TV-show was just part of the habitual smoke and mirrors of political theatre. Syntactically, the poem ends as it started, with clusters of subordinate clauses which emphasise an atmosphere of ever-continuing lack of accomplishment, a syntactic solution which might also indicate the rank of the two negotiators. In a syntagmatic sense, this poem is not only crossing its own lines, but quite simply jumping them. A dissociative syntax of gaps, lacunae and ellipses strains the structure of the poem and enacts technically the points at stake in the poem itself. This is a stratagem of syntactic significance that is extended in other poems, such as the contra-combinatory constellations in 'The Plot' (*H*, 15), the ergative syntax in 'The Turn' (MSG, 69) and the subordinate conjunctions in 'As' (MSG, 33).

Recondite terminology and aural connections corroborate the atmosphere of power-broking. '*Mabinogion*' and '*Quantel*:' 'Quaat?' one might ask. Abstruse words cross the lines of the poetic and the technological. With obvious echoes of the many enigmatic encounters in *Quoof*, '*Quantel*' names a pioneering British technology company and also references Quantized Television, thus alluding to the process of converting a television picture into a digital signal. This brand name exudes public performance and secret surveillance. The techno-textualities that form 'The Radio Horse' (*NW*, 21) also interfere. The ambience of high-tech media production contains a metaphysical and supernatural dimension in the allusions to the myths and magic of a Welsh epic: *Mabinogion*. Furthermore, the connection of 'Where Pryderi's gifts of hounds and horses / turn out to have been fungus' to the rest of the sonnet is abrupt and seemingly illogical. The disrupted syntax and sign-divided stanzas create questions and confusion relevant to the many layers of negotiation. However, in addition to opening Muldoon's ever-expanding catalogue of canine, equestrian and mycological imagery, this magical transformation charges the poem with an aura of delusion and deception, and enables it to end with a puzzling and inconclusive departure, just as undecided as the final sonnet cycle of the book. *Mabinogion,* rich in phono-visual estrangement, diverts reference from the securities

of classical, Irish and English mythology to the national epic of the Welsh – old Britons geographically placed between the English and the Irish. Significantly, these mythic tales of the eleventh century often centre on the warfare between Britain and Ireland. In *Mabinogion*, Pryderi is a Welsh king who is duped by the magician Gwydion into swapping his herd of swine with illusory horses and hounds. Gwydion's treacherous trick results in Pryderi's raising an army and marching north towards his enemy's lands where the two men meet in single combat. By magic as well as strength, Gwydion defeats and kills Pryderi. These allusions to the Welsh legend load the poem with possibilities of betrayal and war: the commanders can be deluded by their own idealism or succumb to corruption, they can be betrayed by each other, or the people they represent. Pryderi, as king of the underworld, operates on an epic scale and this backdrop provides Muldoon's poem with an infernal dimension that opens up questions of divine will and human fate. That the napkins are torn from the *Mabigonion* is a surrealist jolt that corresponds with the Dalínian streak in a volume in which the Spanish painter is given one of the final monologues. The dislodging of papers from the Welsh epic for menial purposes reveals the commanders' philistine and pragmatic attitude, just as the obvious connotations of worthless paper and torn documents signify that a potential treaty will be valuelessness. The act of destruction could also be read as an implicit comment upon the poem's own deconstructive procedures. In like manner, the misconception of fungus for hounds and horses can be read as a ludic illustration of the arbitrary relations between the signifier and the signified. This collapse of any logical referentiality endows the poem's linguistic multivalence with ominous communicative impossibility. Instead of concluding the sonnet, the multitextual allusions of the final unrhymed distich open up a world of textual play. Ultimately though, this relativistic poem does not necessarily assert the impossibility of communication and agreement; rather, it heightens the attention to language and its contexts in all interactions. Set alongside the alignments of 'Meeting the British' and Northern Ireland, 'Crossing the Line' seethes with dynamics of decline.

A sense of extenuation and equivocation characterises the rhyme scheme in 'Crossing the Line.' The unusual circular harmonics of the first and final line add a cracked varnish of self-containment to the poem as a whole. Because 'telephones' / 'fungus' is an off-rhyme that is delayed over fourteen lines, it is on the brink of short-circuiting the circular entity it attempts to establish. This distant rhyming relationship precariously encloses the sonnet within a defined space within which the many assonantal simulations are orchestrated. Muldonic internal rhyming in the poem is subtle, oblique and multivalent. It might stem from a type of Gaelic assonantal prosody that is hardly ever acknowledged in Anglophone aesthetics. In the court of English criticism, they are deemed incomplete, failed, feminine or half-rhymes at best, whereas they

actually demonstrate novelty and strength: 'gallery / jiggery-pokery / peccary,' '*Quantel* / candle,' 'monitors / medallions / Mabinogion,' 'dolphins / napkin,' 'telephones / series / horses / fungus.' Tellingly, the otherwise sensitive Mick Imlah criticises this poem, as well as 'The Earthquake' and 'The Toe-Tag,' for lack of rhyme.[5] He is right of course; Muldoon's powerful auralities defy conventional terms. His proclivity for, at times, almost indiscernible phonetic assimilation demands extra-auditory attention from the reader / listener and resists the idea of a fixed rhyme pattern, as the semi-imperceptible para-chiming patterns engender a plenitude of interchangeable shifting sounds. This instability and diminution of sound illustrate the entangled nature of any potential treaty: the astute perception required by the negotiators, and the minutiae that amount to change.

'Crossing the Line' is a specimen of the Muldonic sound spectrum. Muldoon, who 'relishes crazy rhymes' and 'finds nothing new in the assonantal and slanted rhymes of Yeats,' displays a mixture of poetic over-indulgence and artistic discipline in his syncopated sound syllabics and expansive half-rhymes, para-rhymes and para-chiming.[6] Lynn Keller admires his 'wonderful invention' of rhyme and this typical Muldonic feature is found in abundance in this volume: 'Qu'Appelle / quibble' (9), 'lost a paw / Lisbellaw' and 'still-molten lava / moth-eaten Balaclava' (12), 'Guelph / grave' (14), 'unspoken / not boke in' (26), 'to the Master / alabaster' (35) – some of which are divided by numerous lines.[7] Audio-visual stunts reach unprecedented intricacy in the alphabetic r – g – n combinations – 'arguing,' 'erogenous,' 'arrogance,' 'oregano,' 'orgone,' 'organs' 'Argina,' 'Aragon,' 'Eriugena' in the italicised section of 'Sushi' (34–35), but also crack, speck and swerve throughout the volume: 'organza' and 'orangery' (30), 'Oregon' (39), 'Armagnac' (40), 'orange' (53) and 'morning' (60). Mick Imlah finds it 'a surprising fact that the most exciting feature of perhaps the most eagerly awaited poetry book of 1987 should be its rhyme – given the word's usual connotations of traditionalism, decorativeness, jingle, levity, consolation.'[8] Despite his perceptive eye and ear for many, if not all, of Muldoon's innovative and assonantal rhyme schemes, Imlah fails to apprehend their function in 'Crossing the Line' and some companion poems, complaining that they take 'Muldoon's associative method too far,' and that instead of connecting these poems, 'they're just baffling.'[9] Certainly, 'Crossing the Line' is a

5 Mick Imlah, 'Abandened Origins,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 September 1987, 946.
6 Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 80.
7 Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 18.
8 Imlah, 'Abandened Origins,' 46.
9 Ibid.

baffling poem that engenders multiple associations, but it does offer authentic rhyme and chime and deploys such auralities for specific purposes. Oblique audio-visual connections in 'Crossing the Line' and *Meeting the British* require the reader's utmost concentration and draw renewed attention to poetic sound orchestrations. These attenuated rhymes and chimes paradoxically provoke new evaluations of established accentual and aural definitions. In an aesthetic climate inclined to disfavour rhyme in poetry, Muldoon relocates the modernist soundscape of Eliot's auditory imagination and Joyce's ineluctable modality of the audible by way of sonic innovations and sonnets: ingenious novelties – not original newness. Muldoon replaces the rhapsodic rhythms and rhymes of free verse with an almost subliminal distribution of para-chimes in imploding sonnets. New and peculiar distributions of subtle sounds and homophonic concurrences that destabilise conventional patterns demand sharpened attentiveness on the part of the reader, and suggest non-traditional connections in the wider context of crossing the lines and meeting the British – in Ireland, Northern Ireland, America, England and other places.

The crossing of lines is also literary. 'Crossing the Line' is one of the sonnets most of the founders and practitioners of the form would not recognise, as are so many other variants of this traditional form in the volume. Has a sonnet ever been short-stopped in the first line this early ever before? Or the stanzas been more short-circuited, the syntax more solipsistic, or the final couplet more cryptic? The minimalist *italicette* in *Quoof* (62) – '*Just throw him a cake of Sunlight soap, let him wash himself ashore*' – has taken another turn and this one also constitutes a central text in Muldoon's preoccupation with the sonnet form. Approximately two thirds of Muldoon's poems from 'Kate Whiskey' in *New Weather* to '*LOS DISSIDENTS*' in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* are sonnets, allowing for his many transmutations of a genre that is already predicated upon flexibility. In its long development and range of creative transmutations, the sonnet always shines from Petrarch's citadel, bolsters the arch of Renaissance poetics, grows in the greenhouse of pantheistic Romanticism, or it operates on the multiple frontiers of the twentieth century.[10] Still, from an Irish perspective, the sonnet is largely an English tradition, and for the longest time a very controversial tradition.[11] The celebration of amorous verse at the Elizabethan court coincided with the implementation of plantation policies in Ireland. The relations between poetic practice and coercive politics

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10 Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet* (London: Routledge, 1992).

11 For a constructive reading of the sociopolitical power of literature in Ireland, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, in particular the first chapter, 'What ish my Nation' in *Writing Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 1–22.

are embodied in the literature and the administration of colonial coercion by such Renaissance authors as Edmund Spenser and John Davies.[12] Thomas MacDonagh and Daniel Corkery have pointed out in their classics on the literary Irish tradition, *Literature in Ireland* (1916) and *Hidden Ireland* (1924), that Irish verse centres much more on the bardic heritage and on the traditions of ballads, keenings, aislings and dinnseanchas, than on any imported English or continental poetic aesthetics. Few, if any, contemporary poets have engaged with the sonnet tradition to such an extent or in like manner.[13] In this respect, Muldoon's vindication of the sonnet constitutes a cross-cultural renewal and celebration of a flexible established form. His sustained engagement with the sonnet suggests a number of hermeneutic possibilities. First of all, as has already been suggested, the sonnet offers a pressure chamber for his experiments with language – as much as it is part of that experimentation itself. Secondly, Muldoon's interaction with the form surpasses innovative refinement and constitutes a formal assault upon the underlying structures that inform the genre, in order to reveal and revive it more than to remove and destroy it. Thirdly, Muldoon commits raids upon a literary form that has traditionally been associated with the English – a very suitable approach in a volume called *Meeting the British*. Finally, Muldoon's scrutinizing of the form allows for political interpretations on the level of form and representation – suggesting how a traditionally flexible form perpetually retains an imbalance of two disproportionate entities, but not in his own poetry, which the four-part 'Crossing the Lines' and so many of his deconstructed sonnets show so succinctly.

'Crossing the Line' and *Meeting the British* were written against the backdrop of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A politicised reading of Muldoon's sonnet is fully possible. To the extent that the conventional sonnet consists of two

12 Spenser advances his argument for the systematic colonisation of Ireland in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) and Sir John Davies expounds the same policies in *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland Was Never Entirely Subdued* (1612) See Seamus Deane, ed. *The Field Day Anthology*, 3 vols. (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), 175–202.

13 To assign a special place to Muldoon in the renewal of the sonnet tradition in Ireland is not meant to ignore his Irish-Anglican predecessors. Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' appears as the paradigmatic example of the genre, but the lesser known Thomas Caulfield Irwin's *Sonnets on the Poetry and Problems of Life* (1881) suggests another point of departure around the turn of the 20th century. Patrick Kavanagh's Canal Bank sonnets in the 1950s provide other stepping stones, as do Brendan Kennelly, *Cromwell* (Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1983). Heaney's 'Glanmore Sonnets' (1979), 'Clearances' (1987) and 'Glanmore Revisited' (1991) are other examples. The power and flexibility of the sonnet form is perhaps best illustrated in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's sonnet for the stage, in which the English Bard explores its ideas and conventions in another medium. Buz Luhrmann's film is another example from recent times 'Romeo + Juliet,' (Twentieth Century Fox Film Cooperation, 1996).

separate entities with cross-stanzaic prosody and distributions of sounds within a continuously evolving tradition, this *dissonette*, in its dissipated syntax and dissociative form, could represent on an aesthetic level a deconstruction of the structural binaries that dominate the mindset of much political thinking in Northern Ireland. In a possible Republican reading, the sonnet's anachronistic, artificial and arbitrary nature reflects the political status of Northern Ireland. Other poets' many variations on the norm appear to parallel the political manipulations that have been deployed only to keep the basic social fabric intact. Muldoon's radical questioning and breaking of the mould in these imploding sonnets point to a profound self-interrogation of the unchallenged norms that underlie the textual and social structure. In this sense, the radical novelty of Muldoon's deconstructive sonnets contains seditious implications, as they instigate reconsiderations of social syntax and political grammar as well as poetic practice.

As a prismatic poem of the collection, 'Crossing the Line' centralises and refracts many aspects of Muldoon's preoccupation with language, but most of all it takes its place between the two poems with which it occupies the central position. This central poem interacts directly with the preceding 'Meeting the British' and the succeeding 'Bechbretha.' However, it also relates to the whole volume's conceptualisations of crossing, to its syntactic solutions, formal introspection, aesthetic meditations and political contexts – it even incorporates the volume's many culinary settings. As the poem constantly negotiates its own intertextual terms, Muldoon's aesthetic performance parallels political negotiations, as they too are caught up in the imbroglios of text production, interpretation and contextual awareness. Viewed by way of another framework, this situation of uncertain negotiations also stages the Bloomian anxiety of influence. Whatever interpretational frame is applied, all the linguistic misshapenness of these verses does not detract from the poem's distinction and thematic actualities; on the contrary, the poem's quality and currency are predicated upon its renovation of cliché, its syntactic solipsism, its interrogations of the sonnet and its possible politicisation. This is symptomatic for Muldoon's poetics: he dares to think language first.

'Bechbretha,' the third instalment in this triumvirate of important poems, sets the negotiations in Northern-Ireland, a little nearer to home than 'Ontario,' the Amerinidian setting of 'Meeting the British' and the suitably – as it is squashed in the middle – decontextualised 'Crossing the Line.' This 'political eye story,' a re-run of a Muldonic narrative on a different scene, constitutes a political satire in the tradition of Swift and Joyce, and negotiates with hilarity, sincerity and surreality the powers of politicians and poets 'at a garden party in Hillsborough, County Down, / ten or more summers ago' (18). The actual location refers to the place where Thatcher and Fitzgerald negotiated the

Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, while its temporal setting also puts the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974 firmly within its purview. A possible spoof on Heaney's reigning sense of the government of the tongue, and not exactly a paradigm of 'poetocracy,' the poetics here, apparently, plays second fiddle to the politics. Still, its title, Irish for judge and 'the Brehon judgements / on every conceivable form of bee-dispute' (19), questions cunningly jurisdictions of all kinds. Again, the assumed authority of language is put back on trial by the title, this time as an acknowledged subterfuge. Evocations of the Brehon laws recall the old Gaelic judicial system in which poets were important adjudicators, a system which was partially eclipsed by the Norman invasion of 1169, and further weakened by the penal Statutes of Kilkenny of 1367, and finally abolished in the reign of King James I. As bee-laws, if not by-laws, would by now be obsolete anyway, these reminders of obsolete legal codes philosophise humorously on the foundations and transience of law and order, poetics and politics, at another point in the negotiations between England and Ireland over Northern Ireland. In all its parody and play, the poem also interpellates insidiously the accepted discourse of democracy. In the poem, a histrionic Enoch Powell, that perennial dissenter of conservative and unionist politics, scoops up a threatening swarm of bees in a Union Jack. The act seems symbolic of international summits which constrain unconstitutional groups from participating in negotiations. Within the political situation of Northern Ireland at the time, the poem could be seen to address the processes of democratisation on a higher level. Constitutional politics of democracy are regularly presented as a politically neutral process that tends to infer an obligation to pursue democratic principles. These principles were questioned by political parties and extreme groups on both sides of the divide that were excluded from democratic government or political negotiations. In the political climate of the 1970s and 1980s the nationalist electorate was mainly divided between constitutional politics and Republican abstentionism. The militant Republican faction opposed the assumed neutral premises of successive English governments, as the militant Loyalist faction opposed those of the Dáil, due to the claims to geographical and political jurisdiction in both constitutions. Despite the fluctuations of different governments at Westminster and the lack of any written constitution, England has always appeared to resist relinquishing its hegemony in Northern Ireland. Articles two and three of the Republic's constitution also presented strong claims to rightful jurisdiction over the territory of Northern Ireland.[14]

14 For the nineteenth amendment of the Constitution Act, 3 June 1998, see Roinn an Taoisigh and Department of the Taoiseach, 'Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act,' (1998), http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/DOT/eng/Historical_Information/The_Constitution/Constitution_of_Ireland_-_Bunreacht_na_h%C3%89ireann.html, accessed 17 April 2019.

It seems significant that the conflict in Northern Ireland remained intractable as long as it was predicated upon the constitutions of both Ireland and England. The peace process was only set in motion after the franchise was expanded to extremist groups on both sides, and after deconstructive constitutional discourses evolved. Many critics might deem such a reading of 'Bechbretha' tantamount to transgressing the proprieties of poetic interpretation all together, but there can be little doubt that it belongs to the wider grammar of the trilateral poetic negotiations at the heart of this volume.

As the central poem of the volume, 'Crossing the Line' is a vehicle for an other spectrality: the cliché also connotes the traversal across the divisions of life and death, with further implications of negotiations with unknown and unmapped regions, and with loss and sorrow. Previous volumes staged several spurious elegies for Muldoon's undead father; this volume, as the initial epigraph states, is written 'in memory of Patrick Muldoon 1910–1985' (xii). Poems on the loss of his father, and of relatives and acquaintances, are corroborative of the destruction of civilisations, the ruin of cultures and the demise of language, but also serve as a reminder of how the spirits of the dead and gone haunt our present-day world. Surreality in 'The Coney,' ekphrasis in 'My Grandfather's Wake,' biomorphism in 'Brock' and taxidermy in 'The Fox' all exhibit mechanisms of grief and awareness of twilight spaces occupied by the living and dead; 'The Wishbone,' as the title indicates, brings the father back to life. Language, however, casts an aleatory and apprehensive shadow over these poems, signifying annihilation and the afterlife. Indubitably, the life and death of language itself inform and deform these plaintive poems. Coney, for example, formerly the proper and ordinary name for rabbit, now recedes more into obsolescence by the day, not unlike how the memory of the dead retreats in the memory of the living. In some districts applied to a young rabbit but elsewhere more properly to an old one, coney involves both father and son in morbidity and death. Unusually for Muldoon, the term's associations of femininity are not exploited as an appropriate acknowledgement of his mother's death in 1975. Colloquial phrasing and idiolect – '*Go back to bed. / It's only yon dog-fox*' (24) – mark regional and familial propinquity and feature extensively in all these dirges. Sometimes, a resuscitation of solid rhymes in Muldoon's otherwise ethereal chime schemes – 'plank / tank' and 'cap / gap' (3), 'dream / steam' (5), 'Wales / tales / slaves' (12) and 'box / fox' (24) – attempts to hold on to what is inevitably slipping away by reverting to old rituals. The fate of language is

For information on the peace process and the Easter Agreement in 1998, see Jeson Ingraham, 'The Irish Peace Process,' Conflict Archive on the Internet, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/talks.htm.

resonant of human frailty in these elegies for his father, and aspects of linguistic plenitude disappear with his passing.

More elegies for friends and evocations of unknown and unknowable realms enhance this sense of evanescence. 'Christo's' drapes the famous international environmental artist and Irish nation in the shrouds of Christ, in a complex requiem to the oncoming changes of landscape, fate of political prisoners, weakened religious beliefs and diminshment of aesthetic autonomy. On a more personal note 'The Soap-Pig,' Muldoon's lament for his friend and BBC colleague Michael Heffernan, embodies in its titular emblem fragility, endurance and the cleansing powers of companionship and commemoration. 'Your soutane- / pocket like the scar / of an appendectomy' (7), the dismembered line in 'Gold,' Muldoon's elegy for Gerard Quinn, the teacher at St. Patrick's college who introduced him to the poetry of Frost, synthesises in its surgically precise stanza and cauterised clause the severance of Quinn from life – a severance so extreme in the *disjecta membra* of these verses that even all the suturing allusion to Robert Frost struggles to stitch them together. Terse and tacit textual snippets are infused with names from myth in centrifugal fashion: Merlin; from literature: Frost; from history: Kennedy; from film: Monro; from visual art: Soutine – all the deceased of fiction and fact that have impacted upon Muldoon's volume *Meeting the British*, and upon the future in which we now live. Double negations in severely amputated syntax in the two final lines signify the total depletion of life and sonnet: 'Not Soutine's / *Hare on a Green Shutter.* / Not Marilyn' (7). However much the elegy is contained within the dissonant chime of the first line's 'Merlin' and the final line's 'Marilyn,' its dissected syntax and its ruptures and dissociations, bewildering and exasperating as they are, embody the severance, the bereavement and the disintegration of mind in the face of death. Death and demolition in these lines also mark the end of this extremely disjected idiom in Muldoon's language from its very beginning. 'Gold,' 'The Wishbone,' 'The Earthquake,' 'The Toe-Tag' and some sections of the multistylistic end poem, '7, Middagh Street,' subscribe to the poetic template of which 'Crossing the Line' is the fullest example. For all their brilliance in demonstrating death and destruction in a language that also disintegrates, dies and survives, these poems tend to lack in their language any prospects of aesthetic balance or promise of continuance by which the spirit of the deceased lives on. Later elegies and commemorations, such as 'Incantata,' 'Yarrow,' 'Herm,' 'Turkey Buzzards,' 'Sillyhow Stride' and *When the Pie Was Opened*, just to mention some of the personal dirges and not other kinds, for example *Wayside Shrines*, manage in more affective ways to combine the survival of the spirit with the demise of the body.

Death and destruction and life-coping strategies come natural to a poet who has endured conflict and war, as does a profound ambivalence about the

possibility of fathoming such exigencies in language. Jacqueline McCurry labels Muldoon 'Northern Ireland's mischieftain,' and captures thus his mercurial language, supple syntax and shrewd stratagems of dissociative assemblage, as much as his bi-focality on imperialism.[15] The agenda of meeting the British, even of defining and refining the sense of encounter and nation involved in the title, continues by abstraction and aberrant agglutination throughout the volume. Language informs, investigates and interrupts the convergences and divergences. 'Chinook,' for example, which in its river setting flows with ripples from 'The Waking Father,' invites no easy interpretation in terms of language, politics and aesthetics, as the semantic multiplicity of the title indicates Indian people of Oregon and the pidgin that once developed in that area, the warm winds of America, and the Boeing battle helicopter so well-known from all the wars in Vietnam, the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the salmon also known as 'quinnat' that figures in the first few lines. Syntactically, the poem also moves from the security of the first three complete sentences to a welter of one-worders, clauses and phrases that tend to make it a syntactic wobble as much as 'a semantic quibble' (9), as the self-defining comment declares. In 'Prufumo,' 'a month-long news embargo on his very name' (8) summarises maternal censure and didactic reading recommendations. 'The Mist-Net' renders in a one-sentence, syntactically convoluted text of subordination and imperative the fabric of the bird-trapping device of the title, just as much as the airy eight-line rhyme'mist-net / *mustn't*' (10) is indicative of escape from traditional entrapment. Both designs parade Muldoon's high-flying jinks, his poaching for *le mot juste* and his Joycean snaring of sentence structure, as well as the problems of capturing the elusive meaning of his poetry, in a poem where the persona attempts to elude a dying mother's moralizing, and in which the lines connect with the micro-tagging of salmon and the parental guidance in the two previous poems, and with the famous Daedalian flight from the nets of family, church and nation in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Run-on and and end-stopped lines in 'The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife' equate relationship and union with discordance and endings. Integrations of historical and personal relations also dominate 'The Wishbone.' The silencing in this poem of the Queen's Christmas Message on TV by father and son displays quotidian opposition to English rule, a reverse act of Thatcher's silencing of Republican leaders on British television. Parataxis and divisive sign emblems also suggest family division and broken promises in this fractured sonnet, which connects with the succeeding 'Lass of Aughrim' as the fibula to the tibia. Evocations in the latter of Joyce's 'The Dead' and Roland Joffé's film

15 Jaqueline McCurry, 'A Land "Not Borrowed" but "Perloined,"' *New Hibernia Review* 1, no. 3 (1997), 49.

'The Mission' allude to an Irish and an English anxiety of influence, and hint at the possibility that 'the tibia / of a priest / from a long-abandoned Mission' (15) belonged to an Irish priest. Similar poetic parataxis pairs 'The Toe-Tag' and 'Gone.' 'Toe-Tag' follows morbidly and logically from the preceding elegy 'The Soap Pig' and the title of the succeeding one-sentence sonnet 'Gone' encapsulates the death in the preceding fragmented 'Toe-Tag,' and its own break-up of relationship, and its confirmation of a sale at an auction. Syntactic splits and stanzaic fissure enact their own titutlar divisions in 'The Earthquake:' of the Irish at home and abroad: 'Ireland has moved; they haven't' (23). 'At any moment now this should connect' (32), runs a quintessential line in the ekphrastic 'Paul Klee: *They're Biting*,' but the long-lined couplets connect only the literary and the painterly, not the estranged lovers. An extra verse extends the fifteen-line one-sentence sonnet 'Something Else' beyond its expected end to retain the disappearing moment of life in the poem, and to indicate an extension of its story into the illimitable grief that follows. The language of Muldoon's poetry alters ideas of language *per se*, and thereby also the themes of life, death and politics with which it negotiates.

Self-reflexive syntax, forensic stanza construction, recherché lexicon and flamboyant alphabetic gamesmanship continue to underline the wide-ranging concerns of Muldoon's poetry and nowhere in this volume is this panache more prominent than in 'Sushi.' Perhaps an apologia for auto-aesthetic art all together, this delicious dish of self-indulgent delight displays a gastronomic relish for an artifice that threatens to annihilate its own importance. Yet another poem on the dissolution of relationships – perhaps the one that was initiated in 'Ontario' – and all the distractions of mind and associations of death that sometimes accompany such traumas, this immersion into the art of sushi serves up its own well-prepared language on a plate:

> *Is it not the height of arrogance*
> *to propose that God's no more arcane*
> *than the smack of oregano,*
> *orgone,*
> *the inner organs*
> *of beasts and fowls, the mines of Arigina*
> *the poems of Louis Aragon?* (35)

For all its off-hand humour, this question – an apotheosis of the art of sushi – to which fundamentalists of many kinds might answer yes, with indignation, retains a metaphysical perspective on worldly matters and the divine. Abruptly inserted, like the whole poem's sudden glimpse into Japanese culture in a

volume of ever-expanding negotiations with varieties of Britishness, these lines are set apart by italicisation. Italicisation here marks out these lines as a distillate of language, philosophy, religion and art but, above all, a distillation of Muldoon's own writing. As a citation without source arriving from a place apart, another alterrative, this apposition recalls the border regions which all the elegies of the book have as their locale, and it sublimates the many culinary settings of the volumes and concentrates the volume's turnings of language. The italicised interjection, in its separation and completion, assumes such power and authority that it almost subverts the autonomy of the sentence to which it belongs – an effective enactment of the relations between the parts and the whole in Muldoon's poems. Such procedures of supplementarity are reinforced by the chain of rhymes and the reiteration of the letters r–g–n that unite the segment, and also appear throughout the volume. Many of the words also serve these circumloculations of language. '*Aragon*' highlights the surreal streak in many of the volume's poems and the string of (half-)rhymes that ends with '*Arigna*', as much as it intones the sound stretching of 'arguing' in the first verse and 'Eriugena' in the final, a slanted stereophonic slur which spans fifty lines. The word '*orgone*' denotes excess sexual energy and universal life force in the psychoanalytical theory of Wilhelm Reich, while at the same time incorporating the title of the previous poem 'Gone' that seems to reveal a lack of these energies. As a filet on Muldoon's linguistic platter that also introduces '7, Middagh Street,' the next and final gallimaufry in the volume, 'Sushi' is served up as a delicacy of syntactic savouriness and belletristic gourmandises, with a chef's knowledge of the fishiness of the dish – *fait accompli*.

'7, Middagh Street' supplements the widening circle of encounters, negotiations and language with the British that stretches from 'Ontario' to 'Sushi,' as the final corona both reconfigures and complements the many ideas in the book up to this point. The title underscores the book's tendency to locate itself in historical place and time: 7, Middagh Street is the actual location of the house in New York where the seven modernist stars who give their monologues in the poem – Wystan Hugh Auden, Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Chester Kallman, Salvador Dalí, Carson McCullers and Louis MacNeice – congregated for Thanksgiving dinner in 1940.[16] William Wilson describes aptly the poem as an 'ad hoc Mecca of late modernism' and the implicit encounters in this poem of personalities, nationalities, sexualities, art forms, poetics and politics, and the negotiations between them, are much in evidence here, as they

16 Much of the well-known circumstances of the poem can be found in: Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981); Sherill Tippins, *February House* (Wilmington: Mariner Books, 2005).

are throughout the preceding poems.[17] Formally and linguistically, too, the multistylistic poem is one more ingredient to the volume's overall variety. The title's number seven also addresses the poem's numerology: seven is the common denominator of the rhyme royal, the single and double sonnets and the fourteen and twenty-eight-lined clusters of couplets that dominate the poem. A snippet from Shakespeare's sonnet 109 is italicised: '*Save thou, my rose; in it thou art my all*' (42). Ekphrastic tendencies, most notably in the Dalí section, of course, embrace the music of Britten, the vaudeville of the ecdysiast Rose Lee and the novelistic art of McCullers. Subtle half-rhymes and audacious rhyme pairings continue: 'pencil / Rapunzel' (38); 'oracle / rhetorical,' 'construction worker / soda fountain jerker' (39); 'Minneapolis / my nipples' (42) and 'lemon / Ashmolean' (42). Tricks of crossing the line now transmute into connecting the poems; the first line of each new poem connects with or continues unbroken from the last line of the preceding one. 'Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir' runs the first fabulous line of the poem, and the three first words, 'Quinquereme of Nineveh,' also end the poem. This design, well known from the beginning and end of *Finnegans Wake*, adds a circularity to the corona that befits the poem's questioning of the recurrent and somewhat insoluble problem of the revolutionary potential of poetry. It also exudes a cyclic sense of history and aesthetic organisation familiar from Yeats's *Vision*, and Joyce's engagement with Vico. Word choice here highlights Muldoon's predilection for the exotic and the recherché, and opens up the orientation of the book. The first and final line also form an unacknowledged citation from former English Poet Laureate John Masefield's elegy for empire, 'Cargoes,' a poem which implies an alternative organising template for the many journeys and ballasts of this volume, and which surreptitiously undermines from the very start the status of all the celebrities that have signed in at 7, Middagh Street.[18] The insidious imperialism of language is also demonstrated by the Anglicisation – or is that Gaelicisation? – of Dalí's name, the only non-English-speaking member of the group, into 'O'Daly' (59).

'7, Middagh Street' recirculates the themes, stylistic order and language phenomena of preceding poems, but it also refines them into a larger rationale. In a theoretical perspective of poetics the poem is not only an 'ad hoc Mecca of late modernism' as Wilson suggests, its revolving of aesthetic propositions engages with poetic concerns of its own day in 1987, and incorporates the many turns and trajectories that have ensued from late modernism.[19] Muldoon's meditations upon the international problematics and apparently insoluble

17 William Wilson, 'The Grotesqueries of Paul Muldoon,' *Eire-Ireland* 28, no. 4 (1993), 28.
18 John Masefield, *Selected Poems* (New York 1923), 56.
19 Wilson, 'The Grotesqueries of Paul Muldoon,' 28.

issue of the relations between poetry and politics relate to Heaney's dramatic dialogues on similar themes closer to home in 'Station Island' (1987). Typical modernist propositions are contested in Muldoon's poem: the poem's plural and mixed positions on the responsibilities, or lack of responsibilities, of poetry tend to collide Adorno's defence of aesthetic autonomy with Derrida's deployment of deconstruction and contextuality, and to reflect the Bloomian anxiety of influence to no little degree, particularly in the hilarious misprisions of Yeats. As exiles in New York, most of them from Europe, each participant accounts for his or her journey to New York and the life in the metropolis in monologues that mainly concern the role of the artist in times of war.[20] Auden's Marxist repudiation of the political powers of poetry – 'For history's a twisted root / with art its small translucent fruit // and never the other way round' (39) – counterpoints Yeats's and certainly MacNeice's entertainment of the possible potential of poetry: 'For poetry *can* make things happen – / not only can, but *must* –' (59).[21] Dalí's exile from Franco's Spain, and his constant surrealist clashes with his own group and his own art, add another twist: how do you transgress your own seditious surrealism without reinserting yourself into the forces of fascism, religion and capitalism that you set out to undermine in the first place? The grand questions of politics, in the traditional sense, surrounding the lives and art of Yeats, Auden, MacNeice and Dalí, are set against the less politicised lives and art of Britten, McCullers, Lee and Kallman, who serve more as counterfoils to the reverberations of thoughts on responsibility and political debates on artistic power and purpose. Nevertheless, their acts enlarge

20 For Muldoon's comments upon tiptoeing the fine line of poetics and politics in Northern Ireland, which he also deals with in poems such as 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' (*M*, 11–14) and 'Gathering Mushrooms' (*Q*, 7–9), see Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 124–125; John Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *Thumbscrew* 1996, 17; Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 28–29; Kevin Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' *Rhinoceros* 4 (1991), 76; McCracken, 'A Northern Perspective: Dual Vision in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' 101; Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 12–13; Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 85; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 37.

21 For Auden's engagement with Yeats and his politics, see his elegy for and essay on Yeats in Edward Mendelson, ed. *The English Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 389–393. For the debate on the political effects of Yeats's famous play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, see the self-recriminatory swagger in his own poem 'The Man and the Echo' and Stephen Gwynn's review of its production at The Abbey in 1902 in Norman A. Jeffares, ed. *W.B. Yeats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1977), 376–380. See also O'Brien, 'Politics and the Poet,' 11–12; Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – a Life: The Apprentice Mage 1865–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248–262. For Muldoon's many evocations of Yeats in these ghost-tormented verses, see Jonathan Allison, 'Questioning Yeats: Paul Muldoon's "7, Middagh Street," in *Learning the Trade: Essays on W.B. Yeats and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Deborah Fleming (Chesapeake: Locust Hill Press, 1993), 3–19.

the scope of aesthetics and language beyond the limits of the poetic and the written and spoken word.

In these respects, the concerns of '7, Middagh Street' parallel Muldoon's artistic dilemmas and anticipate his move to the USA in the year of the volume's publication, 1987. The poem can be read as a subjective correlative for his own alterratives and pluralist poetics that always oppose the monologic and univocal. The seven monologues propose a spectrality of ideas and language pertinent to his poetic strategies: 'I am interested in ventriloquism, in speaking through other voices. I suppose some kind of tone creeps through but I don't want to locate it.' 'I've become very interested in structures that can be fixed like mirrors at angles to each other.'[22] As a poetic symposium on performance and polemics, it can be hard to detect Muldoon's position in the ventriloquist circle, just as it is difficult to distinguish the philosophy of Socrates from that of Plato's in the latter's dialogues. Critical responses testify to the success of Muldoon's spectral stratagem of relativisation. Kendall characterises the poem as 'a surreptitious elegy for Yeats,' in which 'one of its achievements is to exercise, or at least to torment, the ghost of Yeats.'[23] Yeats's texts haunt all the monologues and Muldoon keeps his spirit alive by acting the unappeasable host. John Drexel concludes his review by claiming that Muldoon 'is certainly not looking over his shoulder for the ghost of Yeats. Such audacity is clearly out of the Audenary.'[24] Clair Wills admits that 'Muldoon surely also sympathises with Auden,' but seems much more attuned to Muldoon's poem by arguing that 'the temptation in reading "7, Middagh Street" is to identify Muldoon's position with MacNeice's,' a claim which Muldoon's propinquity with and interest in MacNeice tends to second.[25] Both poets were born in Northern Ireland and worked for the BBC, both take a strong interest in the classics, employ a diversity of genres, and converge on Yeats's oeuvre. Furthermore, Muldoon has exhibited a long-lasting fascination with MacNeice's' writing.[26] The length of

22 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 134–136.

23 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 128.

24 John Drexel, '"Threaders of Double-Stranded Words": News from the North of Ireland,' *New England Review* 12, no. 2 (1989), 172–192.

25 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 132.

26 In an interview, Muldoon explains: 'I think MacNeice is very good. Some of the poems are quite extraordinary, like those in *The Burning Perch* for instance – there's really nothing like them. Vast tracts, of course, are sheer dull trackless desert ('Autumn Sequel' and stuff like that) – but the best of what he wrote is very good. He overdoes the parable a bit sometimes, but his best little parables are marvellous, like 'The Taxis,' which is an astonishing poem. I'd love to be able to write a poem like that, and feel very close to the spirit of 'The Taxis.' I can't really explain why because I'm no good at talking in critical or academic terms: but the tone of voice and humour and the bleakness of it, and the fluency and the

MacNeice's monologue and the authority of its place at the poem's conclusion also weigh in on MacNeice's side. Muldoon's impersonation of MacNeice also indicates, with grim humour and inscrutability, a sense of an inescapable responsibility from the nets of past alliances, especially since this final poem reverts to the location, complexities and negotiations of and with Belfast. The poem revisits historical dates and scenes of conflict and troubles in Northern Ireland in what appears to be the final showdown of meeting the British. But some of the final lines also vindicate their own voice and their right to speak:

> After drinking all night in a Sands Street shebeen
> where a sailor played a melodeon
> made from a merman's spine
> I left by the back door of Muldoon's (60)

That MacNeice, the ventriloquist voice here, takes the back exit from Muldoon's, is an obvious prank of Bloomian revisionary and antithetical reading, and an instance of the younger poet's overcoming of anxiety in respect of his senior, by which his poetry also transforms our understanding of his senior's achievement. The scene in the poem projects how the poetry of MacNeice develops within Muldoon's aesthetic premises to seal the affinities between the two poets. It also, of course, illuminates how Muldoon's poetry always stems from Muldoon's poetry; in this case the lines play on the mellifluousness and imagery of bones and brine in 'The Lass of Aughrim' (*Q*, 15) and 'The Merman' (*M*, 39). Perhaps MacNeice is the persona ventriloquising Muldoon the most vociferously, but overall this problem remains unresolved.

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surreal element of it, and yet the fact that in the middle of all this great invention it never leaves the real world … 'The Introduction' also is an extraordinary poem. But he got involved in a bit of self-parody in that book too.' Clair Wills, Nick Jenkins, and John Lancaster, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *Oxford Poetry*, no. 1 (1986/7), 17. Muldoon also exults and elaborates on MacNeice's example in his own critical writing in Paul Muldoon et al., 'How to Peel a Poem,' *Harper's Magazine*, no. September (1999), 49–54; *The End of the Poem*, 26–27; *To Ireland, I*, 89–96. MacNeice is given the largest number of poems in Muldoon's *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986) and instead of an introduction to the anthology, Muldoon cites the famous radio debate between F.R. Higgins and MacNeice. Muldoon gave one of the keynote lectures, together with professors John Stallworthy, Jonathan Allison, Peter McDonald and Terence Brown at the Louis MacNeice Centenary Conference and Celebration at Queen's University Belfast in September 2007. AA, 'Louis MacNeice Conference and Celebration Programme,' The Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SeamusHeaneyCentreforPoetry/FileStore/LMN/programme/.

'It is hard not to conclude that the poetry of commitment, in some carefully limited way, has won this round' argues Paul Scott Stanfield.[27] It is hard not to ask of what this commitment might consist. MacNeice, Dalí and Auden – and Yeats, by his irrevocable haunting spirit – emerge, erroneously perhaps, as the most obviously important figures of the modernist mêlée and their sense of commitment is diverse and transient, and perhaps even non-existent, depending on which criteria one applies. Although few, if any, critics have noted how the other characters reflect and refract Muldoon's poetics, they certainly do. Britten manifests much of the unexpected musicality of Muldoon's poetry and his writing of the libretti *Shining Brow* and *Bandana*; Rose Lee embodies his insatiable word-lust, intransitive language and unusual portrayal of women from 'Big Liz' in *Mules* to the S——— figure in 'Yarrow' and *Vera of Las Vegas*; McCullers represents his novelistic features and sorties into Amercian culture; and Kellman points to Muldoon's extensive collaborations in various fields of the arts. This game of ventriloquism and identification is certainly entertaining but misses much of the central point, which is not to define Muldoon's own voice, far from it. First of all, Muldoon's enigmatic variations rehearse modernist art with a difference. Secondly, the ventriloquistic variety issues an admonition against exactly such tendencies towards biographical identification: the sheer pluri-vocality and undecidability of the monologues offer countercurrents to the mainstream tendency to link up any poet with a single writer or wave; for example Muldoon with Yeats, MacNeice, Auden or Heaney, or with Martian, New Formalist, New Narrativist or New York schools, or with modernism and postmodernism for that matter, when his poetry ranges more widely and actually contributes to the establishment of the criteria by which contemporary poetry is assessed.[28] A poet's commitment to creativity at the levels of

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27 Paul Scott Stanfield, 'Another Side of Paul Muldoon,' *North Dakota Quaterly* 57, no. 1 (1988), 143.

28 The distribution of contemporary poets to the poles of either Yeats or Joyce – as if one cannot go to both wells or drink elsewhere – finds its legacy in the fairly standard schema of authorial coupling, for example Heaney/Muldoon in Moi, 'Transtextual Conceptualizations of Northern Ireland,' 217–229; '*The Testament of Cresseid* by Seamus Heaney and *Medley for Morin Kuhr* by Paul Muldoon,' *Irish Studies Review* 13, no. 4 (2005), 277–281; Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Heaney and Muldoon: Omphalos and Diaspora,' in *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006), 101–127; Corcoran, 'A Languorous Cutting Edge: Muldoon Versus Heaney?' 121–137. For a coupling of Muldoon with Michael Longley, see Brearton, '"Ploughing by the Tail": Longley, Muldoon and Anxiety of Influence,' 1–16. Two of Edna Longley's couples are Mahon/MacNeice and Muldoon/MacNeice in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the War* and *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. Heaney/Kavanagh is another typical dyadic couple in Northern/Irish poetry.

the canon, community and the individual artist varies at any one stage in his career, as do the evaluations of these groups and entities, as well as the very criteria for these evaluations. Such a fluctuating stance in and on literary aesthetics certainly opens the floodgates to a Heraclitean flux, but this is a flux pertinent to artistic licence, aesthetic reorientations and social becoming, and to the ever-evolving currents of language and seas of semiosis. Such flux, uncertainty and open-endedness also challenge societies predicated upon fixity, security and segregation.

'7, Middagh Street' constitutes a meta-aesthetic symposium. Terry Eagleton comes closest to capturing the importance of its ventriloquist variety when he terms the poem 'an ambitious meditation on the recurrent Irish theme of art and politics' in which 'the problem of how neither to overprivilege or underrate the political relevance of art remains ambiguously suspended.'[29] The Brooklyn Heights septet, this 'beguiling mixture of the serious and the silly,' as Mark Ford calls it, launches itself as a postmodernist sound- and showcase, much more than a replay of the modernist question of political engagement and aesthetic autonomy.[30] Its commitment to language is thus a befitting one. English functions as the lingua franca, with all its shades from self-perceived neutrality to imperialistic imperatives, to the English, American, Northern Irish and Spanish speakers at the symposium. A poem-linking sentence structure seals off the final section as a closed-circuit surveillance of its own centrality amidst canonical characters. Italicisations evoke the unappeasable spirits of past poetics and recent literary theory.

Muldoon's encounters with the British are of diverse kinds; in time, in place, in culture and thought, and in language. Surprising situations, cryptic conceits and cultural involution rewrite many of the habitual associations of the title in Ireland and Northern Ireland at the time of its publication. This is a volume which inspects the very sense of Britishness, and in which the British, however it or they are defined, meet themselves as much as they are met by the other, or the other other. Language, especially in the terms of syntax, assumes a wider significance: the volume crosses the lines of history, biography, politics and poetics. Sentence form becomes essential to the negotiations and to the complex interrogations of identity and history which the volume undertakes. Vacillations in syntax, from the prose in 'Ontario' and the looped lines in '7, Middagh Street' to the curt, cut and chopped phrases of poems such as 'Gold,' 'Crossing the Line' and 'The Toe-Tag,' do not merely suit the themes of conversation and aesthetic sodality, death, mediation and disintegration; they also

29 Terry Eagleton, 'Fishmonger's Window,' *The Observer Review*, 3 March 1987, 25.

30 Mark Ford, 'Out of the Blue,' *The London Review of Books*, 10 December 1987, 20.

reflect the continuance and contingency of history, the significance of location and dislocation, and the importance of solidarity and serendipity in aesthetic exchange. While acting susceptibly on the longer stretches of language, the volume also points to and differentiates the shifting contexts within which language occurs: personal relations, political pressures, historical condition, social structures and aesthetic orientations. Always with an uneasy awareness of the many aesthetic and actual realities with which it interacts, *Meeting the British* negotiates these intimacies and interactions by way of havoc and spectrality in its language.

CHAPTER 6

Madoc

Madoc, Muldoon's *ad hoc nomen confusum* and *nom de guerre*, *de theatre*, *de plume*, *de Dieu*, *de vente*, *de tout* for his sixth volume of poetry in 1990, sports another quoofian title that demands attention to its bisyllabic phonetics, its pentagrammatic belletristicity and its hermeneutic mystery. The title certainly connects with the previous volume in its consonance with *Meeting*, and alliteratively also with *Mules*; *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, *Maggot* and the author's own name. M appears as the leading cipher in Muldoon's alphabetic correlative. *Madoc* is perhaps the summit of Muldoon's alternations in language, in many ways a superlinguistic and hybrid monstrosity of earlier hedgehogs, quoofs and yetis, crossing the lines and slouching towards dictionaries, encyclopedia, readers, writers and the critical formations to be born. Does the title celebrate its own creative concept beyond conventional references? Does the word radiate atomistic intricacies and valences? What, who, when, where, why will Madoc be? Do we hear apocalyptic echoes of Magog and Gog? Is it merely an anglicised form of *meadóg*, Irish for eel? Does the undecidable misname a French district or call into play a linguistic mellowing of the new French wine from Parisian philosophy – a hangover from the sushi semantics and the meta-aesthetic international thanksgiving dinner, '7, Middagh Street,' in *Meeting the British*? Does it spell an Amerindian tribe *redivivus*, a revival of the loaded linguistics and murderous intentions of 'Meeting the British' and Muldoon's protracted engagement with the indigenous Americans? Does the term interiorise the sounds and letters of (Muldoon's own) terrorist tales, paramilitary mad dogs and their linguistic reverberations? Does the name announce unashamedly more Muldonic language play and profundity?

Derrida could probably not have invented such a poetic monstrosity as *Madoc*. Horkheimer and Adorno regarded holocaust as the logical outcome of instrumental thinking and the dehumanisation wrought in the wake of boundless industrial progress.[1] *Madoc* instigates revaluations of idealism, Western philosophy and Romantic visions. *Madoc* also bristles with Shklovsky's ostranenie. The volume is flagrantly language-obsessed and also includes the other hallmark of Shklovsky's defamiliarisation technique, a speaking horse: Robert Southey's Bucephalus (named after one of the most famous horses of

1 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1944] 2002).

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antiquity, Alexander the Great's war horse). Muldoon's *Madoc* certainly alienated many critics. The critical puzzlement with which *Madoc* was received, not unlike the reception of *Quoof*, affirms the unassuageable qualities of the volume. 'I have to confess that I really do not know what to make of *Madoc*, I cannot help feeling that this time he has gone too far,' John Banville states, and assigns the task of making sense of it to coming Ph.D. students.[2] Michael Hoffman finds the *Collins Dictionary of Philosophy* massively inadequate to deciphering *Madoc*.[3] Eve Patten concludes her very illuminating review: 'Muldoon has produced a masterful literary conundrum. Let's hope he will soon be publishing the answers.'[4] Muldoon's *Madoc* continues his ability to challenge the mind of critics with his defamiliarising engagement with ethics, literature and language, and with his poetic monstrosity that assumes its most beastly and hedgehogy form in this volume.

As if to pre-empt expectations, to assist in answering or to suggest a method of investigation to the title and its mystery, the volume introduces 'The Key' at its very beginning. But just as language can often constitute part of the problem it intends to solve, in negotiations and philosophy and in religion and rhetoric, 'The Key' tends to be part of the mystery as much it contributes to its solution. It tends to set the key of the texts and the tunes which are to follow much more than providing a tool for unlocking them. Above all, this pre-text points to the problems of language and mediation, language and representation. The opening prose poem with the promising title, a well-filed stylometric reduplication of 'Ontario' at the beginning of *Meeting the British*, fails to connect image and sound in film: 'Foley was having trouble matching sound to picture' (3). The film itself and its surrounding terminology anticipate many of the plots and puns to come: 'He was half-way through post-production on a remake of *The Hoodlum Priest*' (3). The prefix 'post' signals the predominant hermeneutic paradigm at the time of the volume's construction and production, 'postmodernism' and 'post-structuralism;' 'remake' suggests a scepticism towards peremptory proclamations of the shock of the new and signals the numerous replays in 'Madoc;' '*Hoodlum*' proves an almost perfect palindrome of Muldoon and casts the author of *Madoc* as the street gangster to the laws of language and poetic governance. The persona loses himself in language, in 'the etymology of "tuxedo"' and in 'savouring the play between "booth" and "bathy-," "quits" and "mesquite,"' to the extent that he 'began to "misquote" myself' (3). Italicised lines screen a debate on the origins, functions and commitment of

2 Banville, 'Slouching toward Bethlehem,' 37–39.
3 Michael Hoffman, 'Muldoon – a Mystery,' *The London Review of Books*, 20 December 1990, 18.
4 Eve Patten, 'Clever, Comic, Liberating,' *Fortnight*, no. 291 (1991), 27.

language reminiscent of 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' in *Mules* and 'Gathering Mushrooms' in *Quoof*. 'My footfalls already pre-empted by their echoes' (4), the final line rings, with what sounds like a poetic rehearsal of the inescapability of what is already foregone. In its meditations and activations of language, more than in its temporal transitions, transatlantic interchanges and oblique references to violence, the ambivalent strategies of the initial poem anticipate the preterlinguistic construction of this volume. Convoluted and complex, 'The Key' appears to reduplicate as much as to unlock the codes and mysteries of *Madoc*. Then again, as a poem *à clef*, a Yale key to literary criticism, these language-focused lines certainly help to open up these texts.[5]

Linguistic keyhole investigations are also conducted by the other six shorter poetic preludes to 'Madoc: A Mystery.' The seven propaedeutics, 'of forbidding difficulty' according to Lachlan Mackinnon, connect directly with the poetically predominant number in *Meeting the British*.[6] 'Is this a New York poem or what?' read the (auto-) acrimonious acrostics of 'Capercaillies' (6–7). 'Take it. Drink' (5), sounds the final omnibibulous imperative of the theory-cooking 'Tea.' In Levi-Straussian imagery of the raw and the cooked, 'The Panther' simmers with the wild and domesticated spirit of poetic creativity. 'Asra' takes Coleridge's poems inspired by his love for Sara as a point of departure for corporeal inscription and carnal love in a couplet of duelling lines. A distorted sestina, 'Cauliflowers,' ponders on the patrilinearity of poetry. 'The Briefcase,' a Muldonic sonnet for Seamus Heaney, discombobulates in its eel imagery the semiotic seas between the two poets to such an extent that Fran Brearton states that 'those Lough Neagh eels have had as many critical lives as a cat.'[7]

5 For a showcase of the Yale keys of literary theory at the time, see Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). For a de Manean reading of Muldoon's poetry, see Richard Kirkland, 'Ways of Saying / Ways of Reading: Materiality, Literary Criticism and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' in *Last before America*, ed. Fran Brearton and Eamonn Hughes (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), 69–79. For a reading along postmodernist lines, see Wilson, 'The Grotesqueries of Paul Muldoon,' 115–132. For a performative enactment of Muldoon's methods, see William Scammel, 'What's up, Doc,' *The Poetry Review* 81, no. 1 (1991), 60–62. Tim Hancock makes an (unconvincing) attempt to salvage *Madoc* and Muldoon from postmodernist theories in 'Mad Images and a Very Fixed Landscape: Paul Muldoon and the New Narrative,' *The Critical Review* 37 (1997), 133–140. Steven Matthews conducts a well-argued but debatable attempt along similar lines in *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation*, 1–45 and 186–207.

6 Lachlan Mackinnon, 'A Dream Diffused in Words,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 12–18 October 1990, 1105.

7 Fran Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents,' in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 50. Coded references to Heaney constitute a solid frame in most of Muldoon's poetry, and vice versa in parts of Heaney's later work. For one concrete example of this interpoeticality, see

Various keys and briefcases reappear throughout *Madoc*, as do the words, rhythms, concepts and cross-references of these initial poems, with their extremely intricate linguistic patterns. These poems reveal the extremely language-oriented characteristics of the entire volume.

The enigmas of *Madoc* have prompted a diversity of interpretations. 'An Irishman of Gaelic background is, in a sense, a White Indian,' John Montague argues and Kathleen McCracken and Jacqueline McCurry contemplate its Amerindian connections and post-colonial implications.[8] Shane Murphy unravels its many valencies and intertextualities.[9] Kevin P. Cosgrove and John Goodby

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for example how the imagery of eels swims between their poetry. Heaney attends to eels and Muldoon's poetry in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' in *Door into the Dark* (26–33), 'Widgeon: for Paul Muldoon' in *Station Island* (48), 'Settings xvii' in *Seeing Things* (73) and 'Eelworks' in *Human Chain* (28–32). Muldoon frequently flays features of Heaney's poetry; for the interpoeticality of eels, see 'The Briefcase' in *Madoc* (12). Perhaps the eel-spears in Muldoon's verses are not only a metaphor for hunting words and images, but also a verbalisation of an intention to lay this slippery image, and the exchanges it has occasioned, to rest. 'Eugenio Montale: The Eel' (*MSG*, 58) reorients these currents of sign and symbolism to Italian modernism and translation. Heaney and Muldoon also praise, punish and review each other. See Heaney's 'The Mixed Marriage,' in *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 211–213; 'The Prenatal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry,' 36–53. For Muldoon on Heaney, see 'Sweaney Peregraine,' *London Review of Books*, 6, no. 20 (1984), 20–22. See also Muldoon's resounding endorsement of Heaney's Nobel Prize and his acknowledgement of Heaney's importance to his own poetry in, 'Poet Seamus Heaney Wins Nobel Prize,' *The Washington Post*, 6 October 1995, B01. Muldoon gave the eulogy and served as pall-bearer at Heaney's funeral on Monday 2 September 2013. He commemorates Heaney, his poetry, his death and their friendship in the opening poem 'Cuthbert and the Otters' in *OTTWK*, 3–13. Critics are also aware of their strong connection, see for example Moi, 'Transtextual Conceptualizations of Northern Ireland,' 217–229; '*The Testament of Cresseid* by Seamus Heaney and *Medley for Morin Kuhr* by Paul Muldoon,' 277–281; Kennedy-Andrews, 'Heaney and Muldoon: Omphalos and Diaspora,' 101–127; Corcoran, 'A Languorous Cutting Edge: Muldoon Versus Heaney?' 121–137; Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*. Fran Brearton sees other dyadic connections in Muldoon's relation to Michael Longley in Brearton, '"Ploughing by the Tail": Longley, Muldoon and Anxiety of Influence,' 1–16. The obvious sources for such individual negotiations with canonicity and with the frissons of psychoanalytical textualities are T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent,' in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, [1919] 1975), 37–45; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

8 John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 52; Kathleen McCracken, '"Two Streams Flowing Together": Paul Muldoon's Inscription of Native America,' in *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, ed. Elmer Kennedy Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006), 49–70; McCurry, 'A Land "Not Borrowed" but "Perloined,"' 40–51; '"Scrap": Colonialism Indicted in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' *Eire-Ireland* 27, no. 3 (1992), 92–109.

9 Shane Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).

discuss Deane's seminal oppositional reading of Muldoon and Tom Paulin's art as 'poetry of denial' and 'poetry of commitment.'[10] Edna Longely terms 'Madoc' 'a socio-political parable with a *stratum* of linguistic criticism,' and takes issue with the premises of a prior political interpretation of the volume by Clair Wills.[11] Muldoon emphasises the political dimension of the title poem, in the way he also pointed out this less perceptible hermeneutic possibility of 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi:'

> I don't want to belabour the point, but the fact that much of the poem is set in a place called 'Ulster,' and that one of the main characters is a particularly unwholesome Scots-Irish scout, Alexander Cinnamond, whose 'theme music,' as it were, is the 'de dum, de dum' we hear throughout the poem, is scarcely an accident: though I think of *Madoc – A Mystery* as being a ripping yarn with a strong humorous element, I certainly don't discourage its being read as a political poem.[12]

Neverthelesss, whatever else *Madoc* proposes, means or signifies, Muldoon's most ambitious work conspicuously foregrounds language. His lexical licence extends its remit further beyond ordinary vocabulary and the regulations of the Oxford English Dictionary: '*cnoc*,' 'syllabub,' '*gwynn*,' 'wannigan,' 'quamash,' 'vairs and minivers' (106, 141, 147, 170, 178, 193) are only some of the more moderate examples. A plurality of diacritics, glyphs, punctuations marks and symbols provide differentiation and nuances of detail. Paronomasia and linguistic estrangement – Bucephalus, the speaking horse, for example – increase the mystery of the title, as do the reappearing crosswords of 'Cro- – Crotan – Croatoan – Crotona.'[13] These are only some of the innumerable enigmas of language that puzzle, please and provoke the reader. Three-word poems intersect with one-liners, with one-sentence sonnet truncations, and with couplets, triplets, quatrains, and almost every other poetic combination one might care to name. Constant attacks on the lyric forms, which are sustained vestigially,

10 John Goodby, 'Elephantiasis and Essentialism,' *The Irish Review*, no. 10 Spring (1991), 132–137.

11 Edna Longley, 'Way Down Upon the Susquehanna,' *The Irish Times*, 3 November 1990, 47; Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 55–59.

12 Ibid., 152

13 Edna Longley understands best Muldoon's game here. She plays several trumps of her own instead of trying to look over at Muldoon's hand. Longley, 'Way Down Upon the Susquehanna,' 47. Despite all the linguistic tricks, some of the points of his cro-play are really disturbing and they were not etiolated by the deteriorating military and humanitarian situation in Croatia and its neighbouring countries in the 1990s.

propel the title poem by way of a prolonged narrative to question almost endlessly any received idea of poetry and narrative. Alternatives of language, narration and structure abound. 'Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket to Houdini,' Muldoon tells us in his interview with Ian Kilroy and one might be tempted to recollect Houdini's final trick.[14] Poetry – concrete, negative or anti- – will be an illocutionary label for this assemblage of texts that intermixes poetry with verbatim clippings from documents of all sorts: books of history, literary reviews, letters and protocols. The 'poem' thus confounds our expectations and undermines standard associations the reader may harbour concerning poetic protocols. Geometric constructions and graphic maps expand the understanding of language beyond the alphabet. The parenthetical treatment in 'Madoc' of 233 philosophers from Thales to Hawking traduces the ancient battle of philosophy versus poetry. Italicisations invoke the ghosts of sources and hint at simulations and shadow texts. Muldoonesque auto-referentiality also saturates the verses: the more Muldoon has, the more Muldoon haunts. Barthesian ideas of intertextuality almost fall short of capturing Muldoon's multiplicities. This intensification of language and text, attractive and exasperating in itself, also grants to language a wider dimension and greater importance, a similar centrality to that found in *Meeting the British*.

'A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher,' argues Lyotard.[15] Where *Meeting the British* could be seen to play with the trajectories of high modernism, *Madoc* most evidently sifts and shifts to the conditions of postmodernism. If some of the key tenets of postmodernism can be summarised as a critique of Western metaphysics (particularly Enlightenment paradigms), an ideological battle over the past, and a hauntology of injustice, *Madoc* brings to book philosophical axioms, indicts historical imperialism and exposes its legacies. More to the poetic point, postmodern scepticism towards language and questioning of the distinctions between different forms of writing obviously influence the linguistic insouciance, and the splicing and dicing of stanzaic forms and textual genres in *Madoc*.[16] But *Madoc* not merely

14 Ian Kilroy, 'Transatlantic Poet. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel,*' *The Irish Times*, 19 April 2003, 7.

15 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1979] 1997), 81.

16 For instructive essays on the transition from literature to text in the customary sense, see Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, [1977] 1989). Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967) is also predicated upon these antitheses. Paul de Man (1984) asserts that 'the lyric is not a genre, but one name among several to designate a defensive motion of understanding, the possibility of a future hermeneutics. From this point of view there is no significant difference between one generic term and another.'

subscribes to the most overt ideas of postmodernism; it also subverts them. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is 'the great monstrosity of postmodernism,' according to Ihab Hassan.[17] Muldoon's *Madoc* appears as the great para- or post-post-modernist monstrosity.

Ostensibly, among many other things, *Madoc* resuscitates Southey's epigenous epic of 1805, 'as long a labor as any twelfth-century Atlantic crossing' in the words of Gwyn A. Williams, in his book that explores the pseudo-history of the Welsh king Madoc's alleged emigration to America in the year of British-Gaelic troubles, 1169, and his founding of a tribe of white Indians – the myth that also provides the hinterland for Muldoon's and Southey's poems.[18] This myth, which proved instrumental to the colonial politics of the British during the colonialisation of America during the Renaissance, blends in with a dystopic narrative enactment of Coleridge and Southey's unrealised pantisocracy.[19] Other parts of Muldoon's 'Madoc' intersect with accounts of Lewis and Clark's expedition from the Mississippi to the Pacific – expanding the explorations of John Evans in his search for the 'Welsh Indians' a few years earlier – that actually took place during a period, 1804–6, when Coleridge and Southey might have pursued their own ideals along the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, and might have realised their ideal democratic community. All these suggestive flickers are, in Muldoon's poem, projected from a retinagraph attached to the mind of South who is a descendant of the child produced by the 'Scots-Irish scout' Alexander Cinnamond as a consequence of his rape of Edith Southey. South, who is imprisoned at Unitel, is a partitioned linguistification of Southey's identity, or of Southern orientation in the North. The poem '[Nozick]' situates Unitel West in borderlands, 'half-way between Belfast and Dublin' ([259]), in the South-East of Northern Ireland, in the North-East of Ireland, and to the west of England. The authorial surtitle points towards *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, philosopher of justice Robert Nozick's critique of his colleague John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. The paragraphic sign of division – § – between the three entries in '[Nozick]' serves to emphasise problems of justice. This text, then, also reads like a supervision by the right and the righteous,

The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 216. Muldoon crosses incessantly the lines of the poetic and the philosophical, the creative and the critical, and the core and the context of the text. Specimens are: *Madoc*; *The End of the Poem*; *To Ireland, I*; 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*.'

17 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 202.

18 Gwynn A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth.* (London: Methuen, 1979).

19 For pantisocratic plans behind the poem, see Nicholas Roe, 'Bringing It All Back Home: Pantisocracy, *Madoc*, and the Poet's Myth,' in *Last before America*, ed. Fran Brearton and Eamonn Hughes (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), 172–185.

for example reviewers in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Quarterly Review* and *Edinburgh Review* of Romantic upstarts – Keats and Byron, or an Orwellian interrogation of an agent in a high-tech anti-Blakean terrordome, a Benthamesque panopticon, an intelligence centre of RUC-, UVF-, MI-, IRA-, FBI- or CIA-mentality, a metaphor of Jeffersonian ambitions of pan-America, a presentation of any totalising system. All of these encoded levels warrant detailed examination in themselves and the copying, cutting and pasting of these heterogeneous elements into an idiosyncratic Muldoon-narrative provide enormous textual energies, fusions and fissions. Multicultural encounters and ventriloquistic hedging in *Meeting the British* – the volume that John Carey castigated for being 'cryptic,' 'tickled by its own knowingness' and 'packed to the gunwhales with higher education' – seem, in proportion, a primer for beginners.[20] In its exaggerated parasitism and conflated narratives, this madcap Muldoonesque matrix parodies as much as it enacts a typical postmodernist text and the postmodernist tenet of 'incredulity towards metanarratives.'[21]

'Madoc' consists of 233 poems, or texts perhaps, which all take their title from a philosopher, a thinker, a writer. The large number, their parity of status and the ludic treatment to which they are subjected assure, apparently, that no single structure of thought is privileged. This deregulation of ideological argument, however, would appear to display the procedures of deconstruction (in many ways the new metanarrative in the 1980s and 1990s), were it not for the fact that Muldoon's multidiscursive poetic neo-narrative derides language philosophers and postmodernist thinkers and all their postulations with equal contempt. One obvious example of this is '[Kristeva]':

> Signifump. Signifump. Signifump. ([260])

A poet and critic, i.e. Muldoon, who writes such a wryly humorous three-word poem on one of the most famous post-structuralist feminists, and who reviews Patricia Craig's *The Rattle of the North* as influenced by 'the recent attempt to establish a post-Barthes, or "Londonderridian" canon of Irish "writing,"' is surely not unaware of postmodernist theories, despite, or perhaps because of, his

20 Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' 56.

21 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives … The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in the clouds of narrative language.' Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv–xxv.

recalcitrance against being labelled by any poetic school or philosophical –ism.[22] The three incantatory trisyllables toy with the notions of poetry as the most economical instantiation of literature and the test laboratory of language. Testy, neologistic and transgressive, this intervention implies perhaps that since anti-poetry incorporated itself into the poetic tradition, '[Kristeva]' acts conventionally. But at the same time, who can ignore the novelties of Muldoon's contempt within this tradition? Was Derrida a precursor to the compilation of the *Field Day Anthology* by the Derry/Londonderry intellectuals and do his theories contribute to changes in the social grammar of, and the relations between, the English capital and the binaries of the Northern Irish city? Does the French mystagogue merely transfer ontological difference and social conflict to the hedonistic play and infinite regress of language in an irresponsible evasion of the 'real' world? Amid the difficulties of apprehending the plural and protean positions of postmodernist aesthetics, Muldoon's texts operate ambiguously across several orientations of contemporary philosophy. His minimalist poetic review of Kristevaen modalities and his critical reservations about Field Day via Craig's anthology illustrate some of the ambivalence in Northern Ireland to continental theory. However, beyond an evident wariness, or even dismissiveness, an assimiliation an assimilation of post-structuralist ideas into the intellectual activities of Northern Ireland is suggested. Muldoon's '[Kristeva]' and his critical review of Craig's anthology, like 'Madoc' and *Madoc*, execute literary critique alongside aesthetic action and philosophical derangement, and are indicative of long debates and heated controversy.[23]

22 Muldoon, 'Canon and Colcannon: Review of *The Rattle of the North* by Patricia Craig,' 22. Muldoon acknowledges antagonistically the significance of various –isms in his interview with Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon.' He gives grounds for scepticism with regard to what he sees as limiting theories and literary labels such as 'Martian,' 'new narrative,' 'formalism' and 'Prac Crit' in his interviews with Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' 75–94; Wills, Jenkins, and Lancaster, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 19–20; Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 76–85.

23 In his biblio-belligerent blitz W.J. McCormack terms the *primum mobile* of Field Day, Seamus Deane, 'a week-end deconstructionist who would not get a union card from Paul de Man or Harold Bloom,' *The Battle of the Books: Two Decades of Irish Cultural Debate* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1986), 63. McCormack goes to war against localism, anti-theoretical and non-ideological critique of poetics and politics in Ireland and Northern Ireland in this book. Terry Eagleton and Saun Richards map the fronts in bellicose prose in 'The Ideology of Irish Studies,' *Bullán* 3, no. 1 (1997), 5–14; 'Starting Bloch,' ibid., 93–96. For other battles between philosophy and poetry, theory and literature, in the 1980s and -90s and beyond, see Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch* (London: Penguin Books, 1995); Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*; 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland,' in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), 185–211. Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*.

Madoc, as '[Kristeva]' illustrates so lucidly, operates ambiguously within the problematics of apprehending the plural and protean positions of postmodernist aesthetics.

'[Kristeva]'corresponds in scrutable ways with the chimes and concepts of numerous other poems in 'Madoc.' In minimalist fashion, '[Kristeva]' connects with '[Euclid]' ([38]) and '[Anselm]' ([57]); via neologism and the philosophy of feminism and language '[Kristeva]' is linked to '[Beauvoir]' ([238]) and '[Wittgenstein] ([219]).' Vice versa, 'signifump' ([58], [260]), 'stumparumper' ([111], [219] and [238]), 'flossofer' ([225]), 'syllabub' ([141]), 'sillyscum' ([111]) and similar arbitrary semio-rhythmic shenanigans slide in and out of the flux of terms – archaic, abstruse and arcane – and cut across diverse lexical domains, for example: Indian, Gaelic, dialect, navigation, biology, etc. To winkle 'the "semen" out of "semantics"' ([222]) in Muldoon's poetics is a delicate game. '"Paul? Was it you put the *pol* in polygamy?"' ([6]).

Kristeva is not the only language philosopher to be revoked and reanimated. '[Saussure],' '[Wittgenstein],' '[Carnap],' '[Bakhtin],' '[Lacan],' '[Austin],' '[Barthes],' '[Chomsky],' '[Foucault],' '[Derrida]' and '[Harman]' also receive an equivalent short shrift. To what extent Kristeva, or any of the 232 other titular persons invoked, is really a philosopher is part of the question, as is the establishing of their identity. The last link in the chain above, for example, who is he or she? Is he Gilbert Harman, the American philosopher, who has published widely on the philosophies of language and mind, and is also Muldoon's colleague at Princeton University? Or is Muldoon referring Gilbert Harman's s daughter, Elizabeth Harman, who is also a member of the philosophy department at Princeton? Or is it Graham Harman, the professor at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, who attempts to reverse the linguistic turn of Western philosophy? Or is it somebody else? It is hard to tell, and the curt, cryptic crosswords of the poem yield no simple answer or solution.

When '[Foucault]' appears twice, the first time suitably paired with Marx on page [167] and the second time chronologically correct on page [252], is that the same person twice or two different persons once? That the language philosophers, postmodernists and deconstructionists among them, are deployed and derided, and that surnames fail to specify with certainty their referents, enable a staging in language of the problems of linguistic reduction of personality to a singular name, and answers back with irony to many of the proponents of these theories by anonymising them. But, most of all, these double-bound strategies of revitalising by ridicule and assigning by anonymity increase the semiotic possibilities of 'Madoc.'

Each of the entries in Muldoon's poetic companion to philosophy, not least the ones on alleged language philosophers, demands attention to language.

A more detailed reading of a limited selection might illustrate this claim better than a limited reading of a wider selection. Although any poem in the volume would do as example, '[Husserl],' '[Euclid]' and '[Anselm]' may serve best in view of their angular and antiphonal relations to the language of the alphabet. Husserl's famous phenomenological reduction situates itself on the cusp of the problems of reference and transcendence. His description of nominal essences is directed by a high level of abstraction, and implies an annulment of referentiality and a suspension of judgment. Husserl exemplifies a long line of philosophers who polemicise and impart universal and atemporal abstractions that reveal themselves as free from the fetters of any material mode of presentation, especially linguistic modes. To the extent that the reality and correctness of description are subordinate to the act of consciousness and its intentions, abstraction and purpose precede the actual and its results. Consequently, Muldoon's recourse to Husserlian bracketing and phenomenological reduction in 'Madoc' amounts to an aporetics that is both humorous and serious. First, Husserlian parentheses establish idealism as a consistent counterfoil to *Madoc*'s linguistic materiality. Second, Husserl's central philosophical problem of pure phenomena and intentionality haunts the apparently decontextualised and indecipherable textual phenomena in 'Madoc,' a text tending towards a degeneration of Romanticist ideals in a utopian experiment that did not take place. Third, Husserl's attention to a diverse category of phenomena indicates the multiform variety of extra-alphabetic texts. Fourth, Husserl's analysis of sequentiality and imminence in the structuring of internal time consciousness pertains to Muldoon's construction of tension between narrative continuity and stanzaic momentariness, in what we could possibly term a Muldonic multirrative. Fifth, Husserlian brackets in 'Madoc' are suggestive of a perpetuation and annulment of inherited *philosophemes*, Husserl's in particular, but also the ideas of the 232 other parenthesised ancestors and contemporaries. Sixth, a bracketing of philosophical names in poetry indicates a prioritising of poetry in the polemical dialectics between the two modes of writing. (But Muldoon's unique typefacing is only a *trompe l'oeil* for several mock type fallacies: physicians; '[Galen],' mathematicians; '[Fibonacci],' astronomers; '[Brahe],' '[Galileo]' and '[Kepler],' physicists; '[Newton],' explorers; '[Lewis],' royal personages; '[Frederick the Great],' presidents; '[Jefferson],' poets; '[Byron],' inventors; '[Edison]' and '[Bell]' and novelists; '[Camus]' are all included to distinguish, differentiate and destabilise ideas of philosophy, thought and disciplinarity.) Many – all? – of the thinkers belong to several categories, as for example the politician, geometer, astronomer and thinker Thales, the traditional choice of an arbitrary name of departure for a history of philosophy that Muldoon also chooses as his first man. Seventh, as a diagraphic

sign – somewhere between diacritics and a graphic figure – the parentheses reveal an incentive to emulate the shortcomings of the ordinary alphabet, to play games with reference systems of potential critics, e.g. the MLA or the Chicago style, and to gesture, self-parodically perhaps, towards semantic insignificance. (The parentheses also recall, of course, the reflective modernism of the mythopoeic and cacophonous war epic *In Parenthesis* by Cymric-Anglican writer, artist and calligrapher David Jones.)

Muldoon's parenthetical method proposes an incisive investigation into the essential quality of specific ideas, philosophical or otherwise, as isolated from the individual author, empiricist inclinations and historical contexts, but cannot avoid putting into play all of these aspects by the very act of naming. It also replays the essentialist tendency of phenomenological reduction by reducing vast intellectual endeavours to textual instantiations. Can the textual instance offer access to the essence of the ideological doctrine, which the fragment synecdochically represents? How much intellectual thought can be salvaged in approaching textual nothingness? A predilection for subversive hermeneutics that destabilise a philosophical system built out of sense and order via the details and minimal or marginal aspects of the text facilitates such energising deconstructive poetics.

[Husserl]

July 4th, 1806

This being the day of the declaration of Independence of the United States and a Day commonly scelebrated by my Country I had every disposition to selebrate this day and therefore halted early and partook of a Sumptuous Dinner of a fat Saddle of Venison and Mush of Cows (*roots*), *After Dinner we proceeded on about one mile to a very large Creek which we assended some distance to find a foard to cross. Altho' the debth was not much above the horses belly, the water was so strong it passed over the backs and loads of the horses.*

(Clark) ([192])

Apparently, Husserl is bracketed in more ways than one in Muldoon's text on page [192]. (The bracketing of the page number signals the impossible yearning for non-contextual absolutism in the primary system of numerological order: it attempts to separate a single number in the archetypal system of sequentiality, it attempts a-counting of numbers.) A single entry from the volumes of Lewis and Clark's memoirs (from the day after their expedition divided on their return route) contributes to the eclipse of Husserl, and effectuates the numerological illusion of stopping the pagination. Convoluted jokes revolving around

the philosopher, textual numbering, the explorers and the author himself multiply. An extract from Lewis and Clark's journal signals a quest for authenticity, origin and immediate access to historical events that undermines Husserl's phenomenological, historically-conditioned reduction, and its actual dating and authorial attachment. This factuality is a chimera: Paul Allen's preface to the first edition of Lewis and Clark's (1961) journals testifies to multi-authorial, co-operative, overlapping and retrospective procedures of writing and team editing and today Lewis and Clark's notes are almost irretrievable from the morass of bowdlerised and popularised versions. Clark's homage to independence in the diary is of political and national character, and stands opposed to Husserl's apotheosis of the abstract. Consumption of solid food and frontier survival undercut psychologism. The crossing of the ford brings an image of Heraclitean relativism to bear upon Husserl's ideality. Orthographic flaws – Clark's unintentional and authentic or Muldoon's intentional and artistic, or both, or neither – highlight to modern readers the inscription of thoughts by the marks of language: to what extent can language vary without altering the idea? To what extent, and judged by whom, were the Lewis and Clark explorations a success? Muldoon's text traces critically, in its linguistic peculiarities and in its deployment of oppositional notions of ideality and history, the white mythology of language as a transparent medium and thinking as pure reason, and the innocence of geo-socio-anthropological incursion into different cultures on behalf of the authorities, the White Father in Washington.

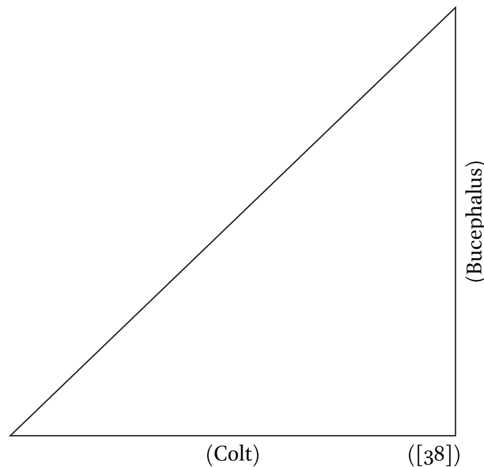
Apparently, Husserl is present in more ways than one in Muldoon's text on page [192]. A phenomenological reduction of historical texts and pagination suggests an inquest into the phenomena and functions of historiography and numbers per se. In this, Husserl's philosophy continues the cognitive imperialism of the empire of signs and the auto-identification of Western metaphysics that also underpinned the colonial conquest and the Westward expansionism of Lewis and Clark's expedition. On a more humorous note, the focus on meat and roots in the poem captures Husserl's anti-naturalism and his tendency to exemplify abstract theories by daily objects. Questions of essence are also retained in Muldoon's citation of Clark's diary: misspellings and imperfect grammar capture an essential aspect of the Lewis and Clark journals. Pre-standandarised orthography parallels the logocentric revenge of the written over the ideal and the spoken.

Muldoonish macaronics ensnare and enhance these postmodernist perplexities. Misspellings in Clark's text (or is it Muldoon's, or Husserl's?) – 'assended,' 'debth' and 'scelebrated' – integrate the quintessence of Muldoon's own tricks of language, and the tracks of his writing. The bracketing of names, '[Husserl]' and '(Clark),' acknowledges the double lineage of the text and its

deconstructive impetus: Muldoon's poem, if so it is, deploys an abstraction of Husserl's ideas and a verbatim extract from Clark's journal to question the impact of language upon the formulation of ideas, and the historical consequences of philosophical ideals. Its clever and premeditated multimasking of Muldoon as the author evokes the philosophical declarations of the death of the author, and the question of what an author was and what hermeneutic possibilities might haunt and emerge at his or her wake.[24] The bracketing of names, '[Husserl]' and '(Clark),' also connects '[Husserl]' with and separates him from the triple entries by both Lewis and Clark in '[Brentano],' probably thus entitled after Husserl's mentor. '[Husserl]' combines linguistic play with language philosophy in a serioludic manner that both conducts and questions the paradigms of deconstruction. It is as if, in its effortless and elegant deployment of postmodernist axioms, the poem questions the depth, the purposes and the brevity of the ideas under which it was conceived. In this respect, '[Husserl]' supplements the poem and volume of which it is an integral part, 'Madoc' and *Madoc*, and it questions from philosophical and poetic perspectives Muldoon's own poetic language, text and writing.

'[Euclid]' continues in poetry the preterlinguistic analysis of the genealogies and categorisations of language:

[EUCLID]



24 See Michel Foucault's incisive riposte 'What is an Author?' (1969) to Roland Barthes' pivotal essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968) in Josué V. Harari, ed. *Textual Strategies* (London: Methuen, 1980), 141–160; Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 142–148.

At first sight, site and cite, the entirety of this alphageometric construction on page [38] apparently confirms the iota, in the figurative sense, of the ideas of Euclid, the Greek mathematician from 300 BC., of whom the little we know we basically owe to the fifth century philosopher, Proclus (see '[Proclus],' [51]), who synthesised the theorems and propositions of several scientists. Euclid's *Elements,* the classical textbook used for more than 2000 years, by a thinker who is frequently marginalised or excised from philosophical encyclopedia or anthologies, raises Husserl-related problems of phenomena, perception and intentionality. If there is no royal road to geometry, and Euclid is reputed to have tossed a coin to a student who asked what was gained by studying geometry, Euclid's geometry and arithmetic practice the disinterested art of forms and symbols in non-alphabetic language (an obvious interest to the author of '[Euclid],' '[Fibonacci],' '[Ptolemy]' and other alphanumerical poems), and represent in philosophy the formal knowledge that turns away from perception or functionality. Other points of interest in *Elements* include the obvious logical, almost plot-like, development of mathematical theory in Euclid's book, which has set standards for logic and argumentation in all disciplines, and the evident double-meanings of its many maxims to any writer concerned with syntax, semantics and composition: *A point is that which has no part. Parallel lines never meet. A line is breadthless length. The extremities of a line are points.* There is a *clef,* too. Euclid was often called Megarensis, due to confusion with the philosopher Eucleides of Megara, and the name hides a Muldonic key: 'The Arabs found that the name of Euclid, which they took to be compounded from ucli (key) and dis (measure) revealed the "key of geometry."'[25]

Muldoon's representation of Euclid constitutes exactly that: a re-presentation. It presents again the mathematical science compiled by Euclid by an utter reduction of his axiomatic system to a mere figure. The triangle succeeds and fails to capture the essence of Euclid's *Elements*, as this singular selection of all the phenomena in Euclid's mathematheses is equally associated with Pythagoras's theorem. In fact, the choice of the isosceles triangle over the equilateral and scalene in '[Euclid]' relates and superimposes the geometrical poem with Pythagoras's theorem of the hypotenuse. Muldoon's rehypotenusing implies a play on the ab-surd – the hypotenuse of Pythagoras cannot be written as a ratio of whole numbers. Triangularity and infinities of the third integral accommodate some of the many triads, triptych compositions, trilateral politics, religious trinities and trivalent interaction throughout Muldoon's poetics, and posit a caveat to facile constructions of the third as an easy precept of

25 Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed. *The Thirteen Books of Euclid's Elements* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), x.

non-binary logic. The unknown third in this poem could be a cowboy, to turn the total sum of the horse and the colt and the cowboy into the essential figure of any Western narrative, whether such computation appears logical, or absurd, or both. At any rate, '[Euclid]' connects cognitively with the mathematico-metaphysical science mysticism in a previous sonnet '[Pythagoras],' the mechanical principles and pun in '[Archimedes],' the letter-figure combinatory in '[Ptolemy]' and the numbers in '[Fibonacci].' The ab-surds of '[Euclid]' are, in their turn, opposed by the Fibonacci-sequence of integers to suggest the careful computation and coded systematicity of 'Madoc' and *Madoc*. For example: the retina scan of South projects Southey and Coleridge's subhistorical conquest of America in 233 – a Fibonaccian number – poems, anticipated by the contextualities of 'Room 233' in 'Capercailles' (text number three in *Madoc*, another fib on page 7), and, according to Kendall's absurd claim, the number which stipulates the total of native tribes on the American continent at the time of its discovery.[26] Certainly, the number combines with the seven other poems in the book to make up 240, the sum of a ten-day nightmare. In comparison to the textual transgressions of '[Euclid],' '[Archimedes]' appears soggy: 'Coleridge leaps out of the tub. Imagine that' ([41]). *In toto*, '[Euclid] constitutes a semi-unpronounceable and unparaphrasable text, a text that offers the surds and the absurds of writing beyond the alphabet, a Muldonic poematic that divides the poetic and multiplies the semantics. '[Euclid]' offers yet another poem that derives from the questions of what language might be.

'[Husserl]' and '[Euclid]' play havoc with monological language and poetic purity and they question any idea of essence beyond the mediation of language, however language be defined. In their attention to the abstract and the absolute, the two poems intersect with the problems of rationality and religion in '[Anselm]':

[Anselm]

De dum, Te Deum, de dum, Te Deum, de dum. ([57])

The sounding of religion, scholasticism and secularism in this iambic pentameter also operates on the margins of language; it is almost as if the harmonious declensions indicate that the more purpose-driven and goal-directed language

26 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 156. Numerous questions are raised by this tendentious analysis: who discovered America first? When? How do you categorise and count the genealogies of the Amerindians, according to what criteria and at what time? Did a representative of the pan-Amerindian nations have a compendium of demographic statistics ready whenever a representative from the world beyond strayed into the American continent? Who did this counting for Kendall, when and by what methods?

is, for example in religious worship, the less content-specific the language needs to be. When meaning is predetermined, present and postulated, language becomes governed, restricted and automatic. '[Anselm]' problematises in its title the proprieties of the proper name, replays in its words and tunes a combination of the religious and the secular, and differentiates in sight and sound the minimal differences of the alphabet – all of direct relevance to scholasticism.

The works and life of Anselm (1033–1109), a father of scholasticism, Archbishop of Canterbury and a mentor of his better known and controversial student, Abélard, is a possible nominee to the name '[Anselm].' The works and life of Anselm (? – 1117), a father of scholasticism, Archdeacon of Laon and a mentor of his better known and controversial student, Abélard, is another possible nominee to the name '[Anselm].' Anselm Huttenbrenner, Anselm Feuerbach, Anselm Kiefer, Anselm Haverkamp exist as a third, a fourth, a fifth and a sixth alternative among many. The unique appellation reserved for the presence of a singular being is illusory: a proper name elides and confuses the subject because the subject is always in excess of its cognomen, caught up in homonymy and dependent upon a system of writing that cannot be reduced to natural auto-identification. Several other names – '[Scaliger],' '[Darwin],' '[Schiller],' '[Huxley],' '[Lewis],' '[Foucault]' and '[Saussure]' – are repeated to reinforce the intrinsic problems of naming the individual that language is held hostage by. '[More],' '[More]' and '[Moore]' contrast, compare and conflate with slips and solipsism Thomas More and Thomas Moore and, most likely, several others. The name Anselm points directly to a number of scholastics, just as much as the confusion of its nominees restages the debates of nominalism with scholasticism. In like measure, the catchy refrain of religiosity and secularity in '[Anselm]' echoes the scholastic attempts to synthesise the doctrines of medieval Christianity with the worldly wisdom of Greek philosophy. On a smaller note, the minimal difference in the verse of the unvoicecd alveolar stop [t] and the voiced alveolar stop [d] enacts the minute points of dispute in the hair-splitting debates of the scholastics on matters philosophical and religious. In title, sonic effects and inscription, Muldoon's minimalist strophe resounds with the sophistication and sophistry of the entertaining and exasperating discursive exercises of scholasticism. But it also infiltrates the lines of 'Madoc,' as the refrain chimes like anti-strophes and irregular parametrics throughout Muldoon's narrathanographic epic to oppose with the motions of Greek tragedy and the levity of Romantic lays the interrogation of South, the disintegration of the pantisocrasy, the expedition of Lewis and Clark and the investigation of Western philosophers. '[Anselm]' intersects with the de dum de dum falderal of '[Theophrastus]' – which evokes, probably, the naturalist and

zoological investigations of Aristotle's pupil – and the Te Deum solemnity of '[Burnet]' – which evokes, probably, the Scottish theologian and his Psalter – and concentrates the many leitstrophes that resound throughout Muldoon's multirrative. The prosodic pleasantries of '[Anselm]' reverberate with secular complacency and religious service in rhythms that also sound the trot of horses.

One aspect of the melodious and nomino-semiotic method of '[Anselm]' directs attention to a language predicated upon theological service, another questions the language of poetry. One layer recounts and recants scholastic methods, another resounds its own echoes throughout the volume. In much of this, the five bisyllabic reiterations contract the styles, the subjects and the semiotics of 'Madoc' and *Madoc*. '[Anselm]' sounds its own significance of linguistics and language.

'[Kristeva],' '[Husserl],' '[Euclid]' and '[Anselm]': this arbitrary textual quadraphony constellates an undecidable number of well and lesser-known thinkers of both sexes and of disparate disciplines – philosophy, feminist semiotics, mathematics, religion, scholasticism – and adumbrates some of the investigations into language upon which 'Madoc' and *Madoc* predicate their poetics. Linguistically intense and theoretically informed, these poems, among many other things, question the relations of gender, essence, ideality, symbols, religion and philosophy to the language that is deployed to define and discuss these very terms. These poems also place themselves most consciously within the wider ambit of literature and language too, the Bloomian anxiety so to speak. Correspondences, clashes and concentration on language in *Madoc* are expansive and clearly of Joycean ambition. Yeatsian poetics is largely eclipsed. Edna Longley thinks *Madoc* can be read as 'an assault on delusion on conceptual, linguistic and literary bad habits,' and as a 'drastic purge' to Heaney's dramatic cure of the same year, his translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes: The Cure at Troy*.[27] She develops this train of thought to an 'in-joke, with Southey and Coleridge representing Heaney and Muldoon in America.'[28] Richard Kirkland expands these parameters further and regards 'Unitel,' the dome of doom in

27 Longley, 'Way Down Upon the Susquehanna,' 47.

28 Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 91. The interpoeticality between Muldoon and Heaney is a favourite critical approach, see footnote 7 on page 167. Kendall thinks the mythologisation of the relationship between Heaney and Muldoon is 'destined to become twenty-first-century thesis fodder.' Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 15. Corcoran's call for a project on 'Heaney's and Muldoon's antithetical readings of Frost within the framework of Muldoon's antithetical reading of Heaney' in 'A Languorous Cutting Edge: Muldoon versus Heaney?' (130) has received answers, for example in Rachel Buxton's (2004) *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*.

'Madoc,' to be the institution of New Criticism in Northern Ireland, with Heaney on the inside and Muldoon on the outside.[29] *Madoc* also manifests itself as a paragon of parapostmodernist poetics, and as an expedition of continental proportions into language.

In its uncompromising linguisticisation, dissemination of genres and deregulations of the high and the low, and in its text-sampling alterrative, *Madoc* presents the pyrotechnical panorama of postmodernist eclecticism, heterogeneity and deconstruction that Terry Eagleton criticises so superficially, and Perry Anderson embraces so uncritically.[30] But Muldoon's beast of a book adds up to something more than a Dunciad of the most populistic deconstructive decrees, what Eve Patten in her review calls the 'consumerist glut of endlessly floating signifiers,' as it also delves into Romanticism – perhaps the primary stepping stone for the postmodernist critique of enlightenment discourses – and thus prompts new attention to the ins and outs of established philosophical ideas, and thus speculates on both the unrealised and the very real historical consequences of those ideas.[31] While Muldoon's poems record these trends in recent discourses, they also reflect the critique by several commentators of political velleity, of inssufficient historical anchorage, of the dissolution of the subject and of the tendency towards a new transcendentalism – all of which postmodernist tendencies have been subjected to. The ironic use of Husserlian bracketing of names, for example, suggests that Muldoon's poems cannot be separated from their own historical contexts; nor can the historical persons behind the name, regardless of the number of nominees. Many of these personages imply political change and the whole volume, as Muldoon's statement above makes clear, invites a political interpretation. And for all its sympathies with intellectual endeavours, pantisocratic or otherwise, the whole volume refutes any uncritical adoption of any singular idea.

A more detailed but still very brief analysis bears out these claims as to the critique of postmodernist thinking in *Madoc*. Many poems and texts are actually dated so as to prick the abstract bubble. 'Madoc,' the final long poem, spans – with occasional ana- and prolepses – a period of seventy-five years from 1798, the year of Romantic revolution in the history of poetry and the year of rebellion in the history of Ireland, to 1873, the year of the massacre of the Mandan

29 Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965* (London: Longman, 1996), 149–172.

30 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998).

31 Patten, 'Clever, Comic, Liberating,' 27.

Indians, also known as Madocs.[32] In America, this period covers the young United States' triumph over other colonial states, France and Spain, and the conquest of the continent. The meticulous chronology corresponds exactly to the dates of historical events of the Lewis and Clark expedition and its aftermath (the death of Lewis, the Burr and Blennerhasset conspiracy, the Indian massacre), fits the conjectured realisation of Southey and Coleridge's utopian plans, and concurs with the documented disputes among the Romantic poets and critics (Southey, Coleridge, Byron and the Edinburgh Review circle). The success of the Clark and Lewis adventure clashes with the failure of Southey and Coleridge utopian plans, and so introduces futher paradoxes and parallelisms into the poem. Both projects were predicated upon benevolent humanism. The project of the English Romantics never materialised, but its fictive realisation in Muldoon's poem of corruption and disaster illustrates the potential consequences of the idealism of the two: exploitation, dispossession, massacre and civilisatory annihilation. *Madoc* was published in 1990, the year before the quatercentennial celebrations of Columbus' conquest of America. It is hard not to read the book as, in the first instance, a questioning of the 'first' discoverer of America and the importance of the underlying idea of origin, and, perhaps most tellingly, as a rueful reminder of what unfolded from that historical event of Columbus' landing, and the mindless jubilation of this ill-fated landing four centuries later. Historical details are well observed in 'Madoc' and they preserve an authenticity within which the deconstructive farrago unfolds, and an actuality into which they intervene. As always, the complex correspondences between the historical fates of the Amerindians and, in this case, the quatercentennial festivities too, and the situation of Muldoon's contemporary Ireland and Northern Ireland are far from apolitical.

Furthermore, unique historical individuals undercut frequently nominalism and paronomasia. In '[Occam],' the ideas of the English scholastic reviver of nominalism, and his famous razor, are paired with the enormous complexities of the life of the Mohawk chief, Thayendanegea, better or probably only known as Joseph Brant in the English language. Similarly, the natural strength of Sacajawea, the squaw in Clark and Lewis' troop, questions in '[Wollstonecraft]' the culture, the class and the possible sexism of the Romantic liberalist's vindication of women, and counterpoises the more radical linguistic and literary turn of women's liberation among Parisian feminist intellectuals from de

32 For the fate and naming of the Mandans, see Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *The Lewis and Clarke Expeditions*, ed. Archibald Hanna, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), vol. 1, 63–103; George Catlin, *North American Indians*, ed. Peter Matthiessen (London: Penguin Books, [1841] 1989), 63–183 and 487–497.

Beauvoir to Cixous and Kristeva. Political questions of assimilation, gender and identity also protrude in these historically grounded poems.

In its determined intent to deconstruct abstract ideas and philosophical systems, 'Madoc' risks instituting yet another totalitarian discourse of equally abstract type. Muldoon's race through thinkers and thought starts with '[Thales]' and ends in Joycean circularity and Viconian correspondences with '[Hawking].' Similarities between the pre-Socratic politician, geometer and thinker in the port of Miletus and the legendary contemporary scientist are soldered by the reiteration of the seven quatrains of the first poem in the seven couplets of the last poem. They also collate science and fiction by the subjection of South to the retinagraph in Unitel in the first, and the destruction of the Unitel interrogation centre in the last. From two separate points in history Thales and Hawking suggest keys to the questions of knowledge, religion and being – dissimilar keys to the opening prose poem of *Madoc*, 'The Key.' Thales and his forgotten colleagues are noted in the history of ideas for their de-divinisation, their temerity to think the universe without first thinking God – the disentanglement of science from religion, superstition and magic. Hawking, on the other hand, reintegrates the science of physics and astronomy with religion in his quest for 'complete theory' to solve the mystery of 'why it is we and the universe exist.' He concludes his treatise *A Brief History of Time*: 'If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.'[33] Hawking's relapse to a teleological purview in his conclusion is amazing in its obfuscation of scientific research by the rhetoric of biblical afflatus. It postulates a belief in scientific progress that makes the indomitable amelioration of the Victorian era seem like the pessimism of Schopenhauer, or the Pantisocratic idea like a poem by Paul Muldoon. Richard Dawkins could not have wished for a better forerunner. Consequently, it is very appropriate that Hawking presides over the final poem, in which Unitel, the ultimate dome of totalising world-views, meets its doom. For all its fascination with utopian ideas – 'Madoc himself is above all, emblematic / of our desire to go beyond ourselves,' '[Heidegger]' ([220]) argues self-reflexively – Muldoon's 'Madoc' interrogates and undermines any uncritical subscription to singular doctrines of any type. *Madoc* acknowledges, even affirms, in its poetic, critical and multivalent account of philosophers (however that term is defined) and ideas that systems of thought exist, and that they could be beneficial to human existence and development, but they are just too many and they signify too much to be homogenised and subjected to conclusion and foreclosure.

33 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam, 1988), 175.

And often, when the ideological and cognitive capacity of human life dominates all others – the emotional, the moral, the aesthetic, the unknown and the unthought – the consequences tend to be catastrophic.

This scepticism in *Madoc* of monopolising systems of thought extends to the post-structuralist nexus of discourses with which it interacts so blatantly, and which usurped much of the intellectual activity in the latter three decades of the last millennium. The book's historical verifiability, its preservation of identifiable and singularised individuality and its retention, although a very critical one, of the abstract, the ideological and the utopian resist many of the most pronounced postmodernist tendencies. Furthermore, the levelling of all philosophers awards them all egalitarian (lack of) status, just as the incorporation of authors and less easily classified names – '[Camus],' '[Lewis],' '[Bakhtin],' '[Huxley],' '[Byron],' '[Moore]' and '[More]' – puts them on par with poets and writers. A distinct contempt reserved for some of the superstars of postmodernist discourses certainly reduces their lustre. For all its delight and creative effects in the deployment of deconstructive methods, *Madoc* also enacts ostentatious mannerism and reflexive parody to measure the flaws and limitations of postmodernist dogma. Deconstructive procedures threaten to congeal into a static position, and thus to become as stifling to contemporary creativity as the straight-jacket of novelty became for much of modernism. *Madoc* romps not only through the history of philosophy, the Romantic impulse, the American conquest and, by implication, the Irish and Northern Irish situation, Muldoon's multiple and alternative narrathanotography also races through the positions, the past and the posts of postmodernism. So, if Muldoon's 'Madoc' superannuates as much as it annotates the theoretical paradigms within which it subsists, where does Muldoonery go from here?

One obvious answer to the question of new orientations in Muldoon's creativity is that it always resorts to the mysteries of language that it never left in the first place, despite the many wayward routes and detours it maps against the coordinates of postmodernism. Still, the separation of the sign from its referent, and the consequent testing of the *différrance* between the signifier and the signified, legitimised and intensified a tendency that has always been part of poetry's domain: to celebrate, to explore and to relish language for the sake of its own play and pleasure. *Madoc* excels in sounds and scripts, visuality and verse, words and worlds. The secular-religiose Latin jingle of '[Anselm],' the neologistics of '[Kristeva],' the sheer illinguisticity of '[Beauvoir]' and the Ulster-Euro-Atlantic map beyond paraphrasability and referentiality in '[Ptolemy]' are only some of the mind-, text- and language-boggling examples. Another is '[Vico],' which offers a litany of lexical delight in a 24 line one-sentence

celebration of the eponymous philosopher's famous system of circles. '[Kelvin],' too, presents a fine example of language-licensed poetry:

> Southey rests on a wannigan, Cams and cinches.
> Sprags and sprockets.
> Parakeets.
> Finches.
>
> Wrens and whimbrels.
> Tups and wethers.
> Laverocks. Leverets. Levers.
> Tumbrils.
>
> Tricoteuses and sansculottes.
> Red-shanks. Her sprackled cambric.
> Ox-head. Dithyrambic.
> Tups and wethers. Boars. Sows. Gilts.
>
> The pike and carnelian sturgeon
> That will rise to this, as to every, occasion. ([170])

Yes, this detailed catalogue of practical tools, birds, beasts, flowers, revolutionaries and fish counteracts the abstraction of philosophy, Kelvin's in particular, and the lofty pantisocratic ideas of Southey, and numerous notions of what poetry is and can be. Most certainly, in the music and story of 'Madoc,' these verses arrive as an aria in the narrative, a poetic pause in the quest for the West. Convincingly, they celebrate language without compunction. Clearly connected to the love of words, music and objects in '[Vico]' and '[Maxwell],' this sonnet of stops dwells on the rapture of rare words, on the short-stopping of syntax and salubrious sounds of unique and singular words, on the etymological speculation and letter-linking liability of language, on the cross-conjugation and synonymic subtleties of language – on some of the many mysteries of language that always vitalise poetry. '[Kelvin],' like *Madoc*, marks another excursion into the known and unknown territories of Muldoon's poetic language.

Muldoon's many attacks on the empire of signs in *Madoc* contain an ambush on academic language systems too, in its charges against laws and styles of reference and citation, of whatever association, institution or press, whether MLA, Chicago, CUP or OUP. All the ghosted sources of the many italicisations and the exchange of philosophers for poets already challenge the minds of the

literal and the literary. The insertion of the irremovable brackets also tends to stretch the remit of reference procedure, particularly, perhaps, in the reference of page numbers, e.g. '[3],' which gives 'The Key.' Although the brackets do not break the system of reference – that is still to come – they surely result in some novel-looking references in academic work.

Novelties in *Madoc* operate against the many margins of post-colonial discourses and they insert themselves creatively and critically into the many poetic, critical and political debates concerning the borders of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, America and the wider world, then and now. They also play with many of the intellectual insights of postmodernist theories, but, most of all, the volume's many mysteries and madcap methods manifest the importance of a poetry that dares explore theories of language way before and beyond the immediacy of language itself.

The language of Paul Muldoon's poetry reaches its apex in *Madoc*. Almost all aspects of language appear to be wrought and wrung in this volume, from its lexical licence, syntactic swirls, grammatical gyrations, insouciant soundings and pure *jouissance*, to its multiple philosophical discourses. Rhyme and reason tend to be other and alternative in these texts and strophes. The volume twins and twines and thwarts and twists the philosophical and the poetic and the linguistic and the historical and the madcap that all combine with Muldoonesque mystery. The mysteries of language, not linguistic solutions, appear larger and clearer and more complex after this creative event, as do some of the inscrutable themes with which the language interacts: the relation of language to reality, the clashes of idealism and realism, the challenges of representing tragic history in language and the processes of poetic creation. The para-narrative stratagems of 'Madoc' – narrathanotography, alterratives, multirratives – characterise the longer poems and cycles of past and future poems, specifically 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' (*Q*, 40–64) and 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' (*H*, 109–40). The multiple alterratives are charged by the volume's esoteric inquiries which encompass the narrathanotography of Indian peoples, the Pantisocracy and Romantic idealism more generally, as well as Muldoon's own linguistic concerns. *Madoc* incorporates and transcends the conspicuous concentration on language in earlier volumes and brings it to its own explosive culmination, like a supernova that enriches the firmament with new smaller and heavier mass elements, with new stars, cosmic rays or black holes. Muldoon's intense and energetic involvement with language has established a firmament in which his later poetry unfolds.

CHAPTER 7

The Annals of Chile

'If I go down that road basically next stop is *Finnegans Wake*, and to do that one would always be a kind of tenth-rate Joyce. On the other hand I don't like the idea that there are limits.' Thus, Muldoon comments upon poems in his next volume, *The Annals of Chile*.[1] The consideration appears sensible after the explosion of *Madoc*. A slightly more restrained course can be noticed in the volumes in the aftermath of *Madoc*. He, nevertheless, retains a remarkable rate of proto-Joycean creativity and metalinguistic scrutiny. 'The word is a suspect device' (*AC*, 143) runs a self-referential line in the narrathanotography 'Yarrow,' the poetic reaninmation of his mother Brigid who died from cancer in 1974, in a language and a narrative that negate and create themselves continuously towards the end. This confession of linguistic skepticism, 'the suspect device,' vies for attention with such other striking pieces of vocabulary as 'emphysemantiphon,' 'metaphysicattle' (34) and 'oscaraboscarabinry' (35) in 'Cows.' Numeorus other aesthetic interventions beyond logical articulation appear, for example the staccato reiterartion of '*quaquaqua*' (20) in 'Incantata;' the inscrutable significance of single letters, for example S — in 'Yarrow;' and the swings of syntax, twists of grammar and turns of poetic form everywhere that testify to the continuous importance of language in Muldoon's poetics. These text samples from Muldoon's seventh and T.S. Eliot-prize-winning volume in 1994 indicate, among other perspectives, the benefit of a post-structuralist distrust of language, Barthesisan ideas of text and *jouissance* and Joycean word-play to a poetry open to the creative theories of language, as much as to the functions, failures and contexts of language itself. Via deconstructive linguistics and seditious semiotics, Muldoon is often set on slaughtering holy cows and determined to try to present the unpresentable on the poetic canvass. The mystic, mutable and polysemantic figure S — in 'Yarrow' signals with ambivalence a heightened awareness of Parisian post-structuralism on the part of Muldoon: 'she was more into Barthes / than Wolfram von Eschenbach: // largely because of *Writing Degree Zero*,' 'she leaned over me the way a bow-sprit / (bow-sprit? martingale?) / leans over the water in search of a "referent"' (*AC*, 143). Such linguistic inquests inherently justify themselves to most writers who take seriously their own art. In *The Annals of Chile*, the groundbreaking and revelatory approaches to language and poetics appear extremely pertinent to the book's

1 Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 13.

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themes. An insistent refusal to accept the given of language, and an obsession with the limits and their beyond, parallel the events of death, life and birth that feature so unforgettably in many of these poems.

The Annals of Chile received a lot of critical attention. Inspired by Said and post-colonial theory, Jonathan Bolton shows in 'Irish Stew at the Café du Monde' how the collection's processes of displacement articulate 'the émigré experience' and its 'liberating potential of extranationality, plagued by the lost intimacy of family and friends, and troubled by accusations of national identity.'[2] Indubitably, *The Annals of Chile* merits such a reading, but its posting of post-colonial concerns from Northern Ireland to the South American continent is also sustained by internal critique of such a paradigmatic interpretation. Furthermore, death, life and birth seem to receive more focused attention in the poems than issues of nationality and post-colonial (which are also clearly present) and frequently Muldoon's neologisms and adlinguistic tendencies tend to disperse and dissipate divisions into the national and the personal.

Tim Kendall gives priority to the personal over the political and argues that '*The Annals of Chile*, Muldoon's most elegiac collection to date, is also his most candidly autobiographical.'[3] Clair Wills puts the autobiographical into play by claiming that Muldoon's entire canon is extremely self-referential, and points to its semiotic functions in a Foucauldian manner: 'But paradoxically the wealth of cultural and autobiographical reference doesn't help to ground the poetry. It's almost as though there are too many pointers, and no real way of knowing how to read them.'[4] Paul Muldoon, in a conversation with Suzan Sherman and Yusef Komunyaka, complicates further the interactions of writing and self. 'I think all writing is autobiographical at some level,' he states, only to counter this claim in the next sentence:

> The complete abnegation of the personality, as the language has its own logic and force. I believe in that to a great extent myself. I would argue with what I just said about autobiography, the personality shining through willy-nilly. I think it does, and yet ideally one tries to give oneself over when one writes, to have no sense of self. It's a paradox that there

2 Jonathan Bolton, 'Irish Stew at the Café De Monde,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (1999), 48–49.

3 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 209.

4 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 12. Foucault, 'What Is an Author?' 141–160.

> must be no sense of self and a complete openness and humility before the language.[5]

In another interview with Ingersoll and Rubin he comments upon the metamorphoses of self: 'But then even that "I"' is something of an invention, as all our 'Is' are 'Adventures of the Letter I,' in Louis Simpson's great phrase. We're all inventions of ourselves at some level.[6] Muldoon is clearly highly aware of the creative impact of language and letters upon the ever-evolving processes of subjectivity and selfhood.

Guinn Batten argues, using Kristevaen vocabulary, for a psychoanalytical entrance point into *The Annals of Chile*: 'Psychoanalysis now offers a term for words that emerge from this place of sacrifice and burial: "cryptonomy," the cryptic speech of melancholia that incorporates, and thereby preserves, the dead (and their secrets) even as these ghosts proliferate in homonymic wordplay.'[7] Batten's article shows an acute awareness of the volume's linguistic and political aspects, and defends its referentiality to a speaking subject – no matter how complex this subject might be. The essay is also hostile to 'the postmodern disavowal of origins in a parental space that now seems empty.'[8] A radical approach to *The Annals of Chile* might suggest that the deferring and differing of linguistic processes render any origin difficult, not only those ruptured by Freudian theories.

Mark Ford ends his insightful review, 'Little Do We Know,' on a curious note: '*The Annals of Chile* reveals more clearly than any previous Muldoon collection his awareness of the limitations of that "artificiality"' [Muldoon's conspicuous linguistic cynosure].[9] This is a curious end line as it suggests alternatives to artificiality in art. What may such alternatives be? Are particular parts or specific types of art more or less artificial than others? Which parts and types? Why? If such distinctions can be easily drawn, alternatives to artificiality – nature? authenticity? emotions? human life? – fall outside the arts. Ford's discriminations operate surreptitiously with mimetic criteria that revert to a range of concepts of language as a secondary medium for channeling *a priori*

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5 Suzan Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' *Bomb*, no. 65 (1998), 78.

6 Earl G. Ingersoll and Stan Sanvel Rubin, 'The Invention of the I: A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* 37, no. 1 (1998), 68.

7 Guinn Batten, '"He Could Barely Tell One from the Other": The Borderline Disorders of Paul Muldoon's Poetry,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 95, no. 1 (1996), 173.

8 Ibid., 188.

9 Mark Ford, '"Little Do We Know": Review of *the Annals of Chile* by Paul Muldoon,' *London Review of Books* 12 January 1995, 19.

ideas, primordial feelings and the external world, as if it does not make any difference which of the numerous derogatory so-called synonyms you choose when you speak of your beloved and your bereaved relatives. Language is not merely a product of nature, autobiography and authenticity that works through reproduction or reference to 'reality,' but also a creative invention with artificial aspects. Explorations and transgressions of language and poetic form ensure liberations, not limitations, and they present in alternative manner the many mysteries of death, birth and life – about which we know so little.

Perhaps we know more of life than we do of birth and death. Muldoon attends to the three dimensions as oppositions, simultaneous events and integral perspectives on existence in remarkable language in *The Annals of Chile*. What type of language and aesthetic disjuntures may possibly give an account of disintegration and death? What stylistic solutions might be invented to conceive of the unknowable prospects of a new born child? What combinations of creative contrivance can account for the two extremities of human existence in their inescapable daily dimensions? As always, solemn subject matters of human existence do not exclude Muldoon's assiduous aesthetic auditing: artifice and authenticity reflect upon each other. Neither does the poetry constitute undisturbed piety and decorum: irony and contempt intermingle with compassion and intimacy. Muldoon dedicates this collection to his deceased mother, Brigid Regan (1920–1974). A complex commemoration of her, 'Yarrow,' and an exuberant elegy, 'Incantata,' for his former partner, Mary Farl Powers (1948–1992), constitute most of the book. However, a cluster of three poems that celebrates gestation and birth, 'The Sonogram,' 'Footling' and 'The Birth,' occupies a central place alongside the poems of commemoration and mourning. Cryptology captures the mysteries of death and the dead. *Vitalogy* presents itself as a term for the miracles of birth and the living. If *Madoc: A Mystery*, perhaps the specimen of encryption and narrathanotology, reads as a centrifuge of endless enigmas, cryptology and vitalogy in *The The Annals of Chile* function more centripetally to signify vitalism and mortality.

The arrival of new life in for example Virgil's fourth eclogue, in the first chapter of St. John's gospel, Mallarmé's 'Gift of the Poem' or Yeats's 'The Second Coming' also announces the advent of language and of novel forms and new eras. 'The Birth' crosses many lines of language, life and literature in its celebration of Dorothy Aofie Korelitz Muldoon, Muldoon's daughter, in this alphabetic litany. In 'October 1950', a date that probably corresponds with Muldoon's month of conception, the persona attempts to come to terms with the origin and purpose of her or his own life in a manner which imbricates him or her with the contingencies of family life, time, politics and text. But these entry points only reproduce bewilderment: 'Whatever it is, it leaves me in the dark'

(WBL, 9). 'The Birth' emerges from this occlusion to suggest creative strategies for survival. Together, the twin texts display a shift in human perspective from self-absorbed identity crisis to parental responsibility and the transition between the two poems might be read as a celebration of life despite the unknowability with which it is shrouded. Consequently, the two poems relate to the quandaries of human existence and procreation at a time of conflicting concerns about adoption and artificial insemination, with 'The Birth' also generating the becoming of language and form.

'Seven o'clock. The seventh day of the seventh month of the year' (31). The verses of 'The Birth' begin with a chronological precision and calendrical exacttitude that relate to the temporal imprecision, the father and the possibility of unbirth in the prior puzzlements and allusions to Sterne in 'October 1950': 'Might he have forgotten to wind the clock?' (WBL, 9) 'The Birth' offers certainty and affirmation whereas the previous poem ends on a note of unknowingness and confusion. Muldoon's intratextual allusion to his own poetry and further afield also includes the newborn in ideas of familiarity, tradition and individual talent. The technique also suggests a larger network of associations and creative possibilities into which the baby is born. The birth is unique: economical syntax and lack of a verb mark the inestimable importance of the event: time stands still, nothing else matters. Nevertheless, the alliterative design and the deployment of the sacred number – 7– suggest the power of art to invest the human miracle with order, metaphysical importance and progenital transcendence. 'Dorothy Aoife Korelitz Muldoon.' Undoubtedly, the name, probably unique in the world, refers to Muldoon's own daughter. The girl is inscribed by Yiddish and Irish family tradition. Dorothy stems from Hebrew for 'Gift of God,' and Aoife from the warrior princess of the Land of Shadows who fought single combat with Cúchulainn and gave birth to his son in Irish mythology. The combination of these names – not their singularity – decides her uniqueness, and anticipates her possible futures and possible problems. A metonymical procreativity that attempts to conceptualise the human miracle, to name the unnameable, precedes the baptismal appellation and family address:

> realm of apple-blossoms and chanterelles and damsons and eel-spears
> and foxes and the general hubbub
> of inkies and jennets and Kickapoos with their lemniscs
> or peekaboo-quiffs of Russian sable
>
> and tallow-unctuous vernix, into the realm of the widgeon –
> the 'whew' or 'yellow-poll', not 'zuizin' –
>
> Dorothy Aoife Korelitz Muldoon: I watch through floods of tears (31)

The child is born into an illimitable but alphabetically circumscribed vitalogue of the wonders of language and nature: this metonymity and catalogue of language and life swaddle the infant like a *vernix caseosa*. Celebrations of vitality and linguistics take place in the first sonnet section before Dorothy Aoife Korelitz Muldoon emerges in the appended quartet: her birth occasions a new stanza to the old sonnet form. The mid-sentence hyphen of the stanzaic severance renders syntactically the umbilical attachment and the abrupt passage of the child into the new world. Biblical ideas of original sin, the covenant and the sorrow of childbirth can be detected in 'floods' and the Caesarian surgery, but alphabetisation, self-dividing idioms and stanzaic configuration of nativity rescue the transcendent moment from traditional religious afflatus, and complicate the unmediated imaginative shaping of natural phenomena in the Romantic tradition. Cerebral comprehension of the emotional situation creates a striking distance from sentimentality. Muldoon also adds vitality and complexity to the unique moment by revitalizing words from the womb of language. 'Gralloch,' Gaelic for 'the viscera of a (dead) deer,' and 'to disembowel' cast midwifery – platonic or medical – in terms of naturalist rawness and the clinical account in the poem of the professional efficiency of the medical personnel imparts rational control as much as the tears indicate poignancy. These words cut clear of emotionalism and retain a stoic composure, a quietude in the face of pain that is developed in the coming to terms with the loss of a new-born child in 'The Stoic' (MSG, p. 37), and that poem's refusal to cultivate traumas of any kind, personal, public or poetic. Metonymic procreativity, self-revelatory techniques of mimetic imperfection and a complex of rational and emotional responses present the wonder of a unique poet trying to come to terms with the miracle of birth. Muldoon also ponders profoundly upon his own poem:

> I would have thought that the poem can only be read a little bit ironically. At one end it's a poem about jubilation and the wonderful litany of things in the world. But this random list has resonances with some of the things I'm interested in – it's as if this world into which the child is going to arrive is somehow one's own world and that's dubious perhaps. … But it's not as if I'm interested in sending people to dictionaries or anything. These are absolutely the right words in the right order. But that phrase does draw attention to itself.[10]

10 Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 12.

Language-conscious, heteroglossic, versatile and divided in form: the stanziac invagination in 'The Birth' adds new form and life to this birth poem, as do the multiple terms of biology, obstetrics, geography, mythology – quiffs of language – revitalised, current, with shrieks of energy, and with a life inside or outside the Oxford English Dictionary. This vocabulary and amazement also evoke Gerard Manley Hopkins' celebrations of the wonders of God's creation, the biomorphic unities of Dylan Thomas and several Muldonic favorites: mycology, hippology, dialectology, terminology and interpoeticality with Heaney. The final verses indicate a postnatal suture – probably to stitch a Caesarean gap as the child enters its new world feet first. The stanza captures a moment of menace and wonder, the risks of everything that might go wrong during a complex birth. This situation of labour and delivery is also, as any poet will know, a process of artistic work and birth of poems. Muldoon's many years of creative labour and poetic delivery enable him to articulate in new language and novel form the worries and wonders of the magic moment of a child's birth. Frequently, Muldoon sets his feet first, as opposed to free verse and L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry.[11]

'The Birth' also delivers the semiotics of the two preceding poems, 'The Sonogram' and 'Footling.' 'The Sonogram' consists of an octave in which a second foetal scan that images the hand and thumb of the unborn child as 'a woman hitching a ride; / a gladiator in his net, passing judgment on the crowd,' complements a prior scan that resembles 'nothing so much / as a satellite map of Ireland' (29). The foetal limbs function as an index of unusual transport, historical events and geographical destination. Technically, the movements of these verses present a departure from literary tropes and national and paternal identities to an invincible individuality that liberates itself from ancient rituals. The scanning enacts imaginative and prosodic liberty as much as the unwritten future of the unborn child. In the succeeding sonnet, 'Footling,' 'she's now got cold feet / and turned in on herself, the phantom "a" in Cesarian' (30). The child's prenatal scorn of the world plays on a prioritisation of self-contained poetics – metrical feet, phantom letters, silence, the caesura and alphabetic introversion – in poetic delivery and the Caesarean violence enacts

11 For all his admiration for Eliot and for all his overlapping interest with L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, Muldoon's poetry always derives and deviates from a strong sense of foot, metre and form. For some of the ideas and motions of language poetry, see Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

how the life of a poem is sometimes violently extracted from its protected domain into an unrestrained world of writing and social environment.[12]

New life, new birth, passing on: Yeats's view of a future – private, national and global – in 'A Prayer for My Daughter' and 'The Second Coming' was shadowed by the ideological gloom and historical events of his own time. Muldoon's 'The Birth' evolves from his own lines of poetry and paternity that invaginate private relations and public issues. Where the narrathanotographic terror tale 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' in *Quoof* and the para-postmodernist beast *Madoc* inscribe their own annihilation of literature and life by way of a Derridean advancement of the future as an unpredictable monstrosity, 'The Birth' conceptualises continuance and the positive possibilities of unknown futures. While the deconstructive aesthetics of *Quoof*, *Madoc* and earlier interacts interacts with the civic chaos of hunger strikes, hardline Thatcherism and paramilitary upheaval, *The Annals of Chile* coincides with the tentative ceasefires. In a time of possible peace and constitutional reform, the secluded privacy of 'The Birth' is in step with the nascent optimism of a new era in Northern Irish history, and with its literary inscriptions. Frank Ormsby's *The Ghost Train* – 'peace is the way you settle in our arms' – and Deidre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* also align the worries and wonders of pregnancy and childbirth with the uncertainties and hopes of a peace process in Northern Ireland.[13] In comparison to these provisional sketches of individual and social uncertainties, Heaney – still grand master of memory and metrics – has recourse to overt religious and literary templates in his volume of retrospection in 2001, *Electric Light*. Procreation in 'Out of the Bag' is firmly couched in the terms of nostalgia of childhood and religious rituals, and his resuscitation of Virgil's encomiastic birth poem 'Eclogue IV' nods belatedly to the new

12 Muldonic intricacies of this kind are multiple. This quip on ceasarean and caesura extends in *The Annals of Chile* to 'César Vallejo: Testimony' (32), 'the unvoiced "c" in Connecticut' (139) and the ironic intrusion, '(note the caesura)' (64), which, of course, fills in the gap to which it draws attention. Leaps of language, logic, time and space, frequently indicted by the sign §, characterise Muldonic technique and imagination, and mark most poems in this collection. Lawrence Norfolk comments on 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' 'that any paraphrase would need to distinguish more varieties of caesura than the Inuit supposedly do snow.' 'The Abundant Braes of Yarrow,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 21 August 1994, 32. Similar sound distinctions and disappearances in other volumes include: 'So long as there's an "if" in California,' (*WBL*, 39); 'Paul? Was it you put the pol in polygamy,' (*Mad*, 6); 'You can take the man out of Armagh but, you may ask yourself / can you take the Armagh out of the man in the big Armani suit?' (*H*, 43); 'an orgasm, you see, sir, or a seizure' (*H*, 49); 'there's an Auden in every Audenauer,' (*H*, 105).

13 Frank Ormsby, *The Ghost Train* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1995), 51; Deirdre Madden, *One by One in Darkness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

pragmatic politics in the North and the conditions that would lead to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, while also bestowing an accolade upon the victor (whoever that might be). Despite the artistic grandeur of *Electric Light*, Heaney had proceeded from controversial sedition in Northern Ireland via visionary frames of reference to the status of an Amnesty International laureate.[14] In 1994, Muldoon's 'The Birth' sustains much of its visionary power in its privacy and in its eschewal of the political pressures that nevertheless provide one of the many frames to the poem. Muldoon's 'The Birth' contributes to a tendency in the writing of Northern Ireland in the 1990s that moved beyond old concepts of Mother Ireland to new imaginings and new possibilities; in language, in literature and in identity and national future.

The belle-lettristic and aurally-shaped poetic triplet of 'The Sonogram,' 'Footling' and 'The Birth' manifests the arrival of a premeditated linguistic aestheticism. Neologisms, a copious variety of registers, misprisions and seemingly semiotic inapprehensiveness mediate the wonders of birth and life amidst the uncertainties and finitudes of the human existence. Too obviously, perhaps, the conception, gestation and delivery of the child in these poems also play on a structuralist view of the inescapable formativeness of language and the motions of generative grammar. Muldoon's acts of metametonomy and alphagendering, however, revel as much in Derridean ideas of writing, iteration and context as in the possibilities of poetics and linguistics liberated by performative linguistics and Jakobsonian analyses.

In their exposure of private life these textual triplets reveal a naked Muldoon; the author disentangles himself from his previous nexus of paronomasia and homonymic forms, especially in *Mules*. His subjective correlatives here flow in a more intimate and personal vein. However, this aspect brings into view new characteristics of Muldoon as a vulnerable and collaborative partner and parent: more accessible, parental, poignant and even lachrymose, and less encoded, rebellious, ironic and callous. These texts also belong to a large family of ancestral literature and contemporary writing, and foster new images of a Northern Ireland in the transition from the death of war to the inception of peace. All the same, his alphabetical formations, metrical cohesion and formal assuredness keep in check profuse emotionalism and communal commitment, and resist an unmediated referentiality. As much as an autobiographical account or public metaphor, 'The Birth,' 'Footling' and 'The Sonogram' co-exist

14 For an analysis of Heaney's *Electric Light*, see Ruben Moi, '"The Cure of Poetry That Cannot Be Coerced": Text, Canon and Context in Seamus Heaney's *Electric Light*,' in *New Perspectives on Seamus Heaney*, edited by Bland Crowder and Jason Hall (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 172–189.

as *alphagrams* of lingual engendering and human procreativity. They evince how deconstructed concepts of language, author and context produce a text of alphabetic conceit, aesthetic élan, autobiographical explicitness and contextual consequence. Perhaps the shifts from organicist to alphabetic poetics, from metonymy to metametonymy, from structuralist to deconstructive linguistics ensure for posterity the lives of the poems, their author and their subject. Perhaps the many alignments of human procreativity with the theories of language will come to mark the end of the century Rorty found, already in 1967, to be characterised by the linguistic turn, a turn Muldoon exhausted in *Madoc*.[15]

This poetic trinity, with its subject matter of Dorothy Aofie Korelitz Muldoon, its alphabetic revelations and its stanzaic strategy, embodies most of the concerns and creativity of *The Annals of Chile*. From A to Z, from beginning to end, from alpha to omega, *The Annals of Chile* is enlivened by a gynocentric universe of engendered forms, alphabetic evolutions and polycentric lines of identity. For example: Muldoon opens *The Annals of Chile* with a translation of the myth of Leto from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. The passage erects a textual scaffolding for the volume's geographical, identitarian, poetic and public indeterminacies. Classical accounts of the misogynist persecutions of a female demiurge intersect with spite, hatred and vengeance in Northern Ireland, and conduct a dialogue with Heaney's poetry. The template, *Metamorphoses*, above all, captures the mutations and transformations of language itself as a state both separate from and spliced with its subject matter and contextual concerns, the type of Muldonic *tranceformation* set up by 'Trance' and *Mules*.[16]

Births, transitions and tranceformations of language, lines and location charge the whole volume with vital novelty and the matrilinealty of language, family and nation from the triplet of birth poems also inhere in 'Brazil.' This text presents Oedipal relations between child and mother, a pool of undifferentiated desire that also effects geo-linguistic orientations: 'if not Brazil, then Uruguay,' 'if not Uruguay, then Ecuador' (6). The chain of displacements destabilises the geographic certainty of the title, and desublimates the urge for an idealised location in the mythology of Hy Breasil. Illicit attraction to the mother and linguistic dispersion end with the appearance of a paternal figure:

15 Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

16 See the analysis of 'Trance' and *Mules* on pages xx–xx. For an analytical survey of Ovidian templates in contemporary Northern Irish poetry, see John Kerrigan, 'Ulster Ovids,' in *The Chosen Ground*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1992), 237–270.

'There is inherent vice

in everything,' as O'Higgins
would proclaim: it was O'Higgins who duly

had the terms 'widdershins'
and 'deasil' expunged from the annals of Chile. (7)

O'Higgins, a man of Irish descent who contributed to the liberation of Chile, also acted as a linguistic censor (at least in Muldoon's poem) by expunging the English word for anti-clockwise and the Irish word for clockwise. Muldoon's reinsertion of the terms constitutes an act of linguistic authority and indicates a word-right beyond censure. 'Oscar,' the communications code for the letter O (which is almost indistinguishable from the digit for nothing, 0), functions in its supplicatory evocation of disfiguration as a vehicle for semantic transport. As much as nominating a number of famous figures of indeterminable identity, the proper name is already marked by alphabetic iteration and paronomasia. Writing marks identity with sameness, alterities and alternatives. Remarkably, this poem anticipates some, but not only, tragic fates. The heroic death in single combat of Oscar, Gaelic for deer-lover, ended the Fenian cycle. fate and the love of animals appear with macabre feminism in this post-mortem battle:

my mother's skeleton

has managed to worm
its way back on top of the old man's,
and she once again has him under her thumb. (8–9)

In the contexts of this book, the grave scene is both autobibliographical and autobiographical: Old Mother Ireland never will succumb, parental differences from 'The Mixed Marriage' (*M*, 42) and numerous previous poems are not put to rest, Muldoon's elegies for his parents are prodigious. This posthumous gender combat appears as the final denouement after two scenes of domestic amorousness and dramatic disappearance. In view of these transformation scenes, with their visual qualities and melodramatic morbidity, the title hands out its own Oscar for cinematic techniques, and recalls the histrionics and tragedy of Wilde, whose heroic name he received from his mother – the nineteenth century Irish nationalist and mythographer Lady Jane Francesca Wilde – turned out to be dismally prophetic. In the domestic scene of the poem Oscar also denotes the family dog that 'lies between us like an ancient quoof': the

incestuous pedigree of Muldoonian linguistics deviates from dictionaries, etymologies and ordinary proprieties. In its many disfigurations of prominent men, 'Oscar' also extends to Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar*. Written for Field Day and denounced by Edna Longley as 'axes, tears and cheap epigrams,' the play is one of the many texts appropriated by the customary ideological divisions of culture in Northern Ireland.[17] 'Oscaraboscarabinary,' states the later poem 'Cows' (33). The disfigurations of 'Oscar' unmake ideas of transparent language, simplistic identitarian referentiality and the too frequent binary delineations of culture in Northern Ireland.

'Oscar' indicates, among many other things, a dog's life, 'Cows' something else. This poem is dedicated to the Belfast painter Dermot Seymor, whose paintings cover the book jackets of *The Annals of Chile* and of Muldoon's 1995 play, *Six Honest Serving Men*. The superlinguistic characteristics of the poem, however, tend to eclipse the ekphrastic frame of reference. Cows – not dogs, cattle or oxen – engender matrilineal lines through an emphasis on forms of femaleness and domesticity that stand opposed to the other collective names for the beast that stress property and production. The audacity of juxtaposing women to not entirely complimentary creatures of nature revivifies the slanted gynocentrism of *Mules* and the many feminine beasts of *Quoof*, not least the chauvinist herding of cows in 'Cherish the Ladies.' The chauvinist herding includes branding and sardonic humour: 'Had Hawthorne been a Gael, / I insist, the scarlet "A" on Hester Prynne / would have stood for alcohol' (33). The ironic quip imprints alphabetic significance upon the poem and signifies cultural stigmatisation as being among the poem's discourses. A cattle truck in contentious borderlands – Northern/Irish more than South-American – transposes mythological cattle raids and silk of the kine symbolism to contemporary controversies, and illustrates the poem's many crossings. The freight carrier becomes a vehicle for hidden meanings and semantic motoring as much as for the smuggling of illicit merchandise. 'Cattle' still evokes the border campaigns and armed raids of epic tales, such as *Táin Bó Cúailnge, The Cattle Raid of Cooley*. During the recent war in Northern Ireland cattle trucks were as likely to smuggle microwaves, hi-fis, arms, petrol and alcohol as to transport livestock.[18] Obsolete Old English for royal and rare for cine, outmoded and philological significations of kine (cows) remain present in the poem's Republican resonances and cinematic techniques: 'Again the flash. Again the fade.' In the sense

17 Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar* (Derry: Field Day, 1989); Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 29.

18 See Thomas Kinsella's translation and Louis Brocquy's illustration of the old epic: *The Táin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

of the gestures of non-vocal communication, kine fits the smugglers' silence and all the codes of Northern Irish interactions in a poetic heterologics reminiscent of 'The Radio Horse' from *New Weather* (21). Such translations meet with the neologendering of the bovine: 'Emphysemantiphon of cows,' 'no Devon cow-coterie,' 'the metaphysicattle of Japan,' 'some oscaraboscarabinary bevy of cattle' overrun the elaborate etymology of 'boreen' – Gaelic for cow path and reminiscent of the mode of (Heaney's) place-name poems. The whole poem, this one too you might say, puts Muldoon's denial of interest 'in sending people to dictionaries or anything' into a peculiar light.[19] Linguistic cowplay meets with ekphrasis: 'Cows' verbalises Seymour's visual catalogue of cows, and his surreal *The Russians Will Water Their Horses on the Shores of Lough Neagh*. Do Muldoon's 387 words say more than Seymor's painting? The challenge is certainly there, and perhaps they do in their mind-provoking language and concerns. Finally, the poem apparently explodes codification and frames:

> Now let us talk of slaughter and the slain,
> the helicopter gun-ship, the mighty Kalashnikov:
> let's rest for a while in a place where a cow has lain. (35)

The Russian Kalashnikov, the most popular assault rifle in the world also known as the AK-47, connects the state in the poem with paranoia, the Cold War 'red scare' mindset and guerilla warfare in so many other corners on the globe. The anxieties are also of the artistic kind. The 'talk of the slaughter and the slain' disposes with conversation of language and literature in the poem and the final line can be read as an obvious misprision of Yeats's 'Memory' which highlights the manner in which Muldoon's verse preserves and perverts Yeats's lyrical commemoration of forgetfulness. These anxieties are also suffused with the fright and fear of the couple on the run from or to the Volkswagen in the borderlands in 'Ireland' (WBL, 19). Furthermore, the final lines relate uneasily to the many states, orders and discourses in 'Pancho Villa' (*M,* 11–13). In a manner echoing the unsettled admonitions in 'Pancho Villa,' parts of the conclusion in 'Cows' command an uncoded explicitness that the rest of the poem avoids: direct calls for committed poetry which adopts an iconography of army presence and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland and other war zones, and provides some poetic comfort and consolation. But this explicitness is nothing but a statement that is alarmingly unconscious of, or deliberately conceals, its own codifications. Arguably, an unmediated artistic engagement with violence indulgence, trauma cultivation and war poetry only

19 Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 12.

prolongs in imagination geo-socio-political schismogenesis and entails simplistic deployment of language. Recourse to colloquialisms – 'talk of slaughter and the slain' – confirms communal lingo and monomindedness. A mere reproduction of an infallible and calcified language of referentiality and communication predetermines recognition of the established more than it presents cognitions of the emergent. Facile pastoralism evokes the pleasantries of past oral traditions and fables, and pays lip service to those who will not see or listen or go beyond their own world view. As such, the final lines do not conclude, they constitute another statement that requires decoding in the overlapping systems of significations. The balancing of coded language and explicit rhetoric is a well-known phenomenon in the many discourses commonly found in more politically-charged social environments. Such contestation of competing styles, registers and rhythms is standard to the dynamics of literature too, as Bakhtin demonstrates so forcefully, and Muldoon enacts with such conceit.[20]

'"Paul? Was it you put the pol in polygamy,"' runs the alliterative and punning New York poetry scene query in the acrostic poem 'Capercaillies' (6). Whatever the answer is, it seems certain that Muldoon has certainly contributed to a lot of other polies. His creativity with language – the copulation of Gaelic and English, the many neologisms, the revitalisation of old words, the numerous attempts to penetrate or violate the OED, the consistent engendering of conceit, the spurts of irreverent and irreconcilable semantics, his intimate relations to Yeats and Heaney and numerous other poets, his autoreferentiality, his ambivalent intercourse with post-structuralist concepts of language, his frequent outrageous polytextuality – gives shape, significance and salt to his many birth poems and vitalalistic verses at a time of transitions in the poetics of Northern Ireland and elsewhere, and in the societies with which *The Annals of Chile* interacts most closely.

The birth poems might be the most novel and propitious in *The Annals of Chile*, but an elegiac tone, nevertheless, prevails in the volume. Whereas the vitalogy of the birth poems stems from the miracles of human anatomy and procreation, many poems in this book, for example 'Milkweed and Monrach,' 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow' derive their cryptology from death and mourning. The entire book is dedicated to Muldoon's mother. She dwells in the maternal and feminine aspects of the volume even though direct reference is continually deferred. Leto in the opening revivification of 'Ovid: Metamorphoses,' the mother in 'Brazil,' the wife in 'Oscar,' motherhood in the birth poems, femaleness in 'Cows,' partnership in 'Incantata' and associations of Mother Mary and

20 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

Mother Ireland contribute to the complex commemoration of Muldoon's mother, a commemoration that eschews wholesome encomium, a commemoration that questions, probes, refracts, continues.

Philosophers have grappled with the concerns of death and commemoration from Plato's *Phaido* to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* and Cicero states in his fifth philippic that 'the life of the dead consists in the recollection cherished of them by the living.'[21] The canon of poetry's immemorial office to lament the dead includes in modern times Milton's 'Lycidas' for King,' Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard,' Shelley's 'Adonais' for Keats, Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,' Tennyson's 'In Memoriam A.H.H.' for Arthur Henry Hallam, Eileen O'Connel's 'Lament for Art O'Leary' for her husband and W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats.' Elegies hold a central place in Yeats's verses: 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,' 'Sixteen Dead Men,' 'Parnell's Funeral,' 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited,' 'Under Ben Bulben.' Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian and Ciaran Carson's poetry include elegies and laments; Northern Ireland was a place of death and mourning during The Troubles. Heaney's *oeuvre* is replete with elegies for victims of the Troubles, for his family and for his fellow artists and poets in such poems as 'Elegy for a Still-born Child,' 'The Strand at Lough Beg' for his murdered cousin Colum McCartney, 'Casualty' for his friend Louis O'Neill, 'In Memoriam Seán Ó Riada' for the famous composer, 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge for the Irish poet, 'Clearances' for his mother, 'On His Work in the English Tongue' and 'Stern' for Ted Hughes, 'Audenesque' and 'The Hug' for Joseph Brodsky, 'Out of this World' for his fellow Polish poet and 1980 Polish Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, 'Death of a Painter' and 'Loughanure' for painters Nancy Wynne Jones and Colin Middleton and 'The door was opened and the house was dark' for singer David Hammond.[22] Joyce's 'The Dead,' which Muldoon makes the *omphalos* of his creative-critical abecedarium of the acknowledged and the arcane in Irish literature, *To Ireland, I*, together with Yeats's 'Easter 1916,' still tend to occupy the centre of the canon of commemoration in Ireland and beyond.

The preservation of the memory of the many subjects of these elegies is perpetuated by their ebalmment in linguistically innovative language, and via

21 Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C.D. Younge, vol. 4 (The Project Gutenberg Ebook: The Project Gutenberg Ebook, [43 BC] 2004).

22 For further reading on elegies, see Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats & the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Matthew Campbell, 'Muldoon's Remains,' in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 170–188; Clair Wills, 'Muldoon and the Dead,' in *Paul Muldoon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2006), 189–199.

a creative prosodic mastery and renewal of literary form: this aesthetic novelty honours the subject's uniqueness and perpetuates the life and death of the deceased in the memory of the living. In the longer lines of life and literature, Wordsworth, for example, complains of inadequate language in Thomas Grey's dirge 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr Richard West, 1742' in *Lyrical Ballads,* and laments the 'sad incompetence of human speech' in the face of natural grandeur and imagination in *The Prelude*.[23] Poetry's challenge to represent the unpresentable reaches an apogee in attempts to apprehend the sublime and the metaphysical dimensions of the human existence in the stern face of loss and death. Muldoon inserts himself vigorously into the tradition of recollecting the dead. Enigmatic linguistics, coded forms and anguished attempts to utter the unutterable prolong the lives of the deceased in the memory of those who mourn them. Muldoon's poetry, like his literary creativity in *To Ireland, I,* crosses the many subtleties of the old and the new in life, death, literature. The breaking of language, prosody and form discloses new insight, new rhythms, new formations of how we live and think in respect to the dead and gone. Muldoon's elegies are Muldoonesque: the vital and boundless language of the birth poems is in many ways infused into the laments.

'Incantata' recreates the art and life of Mary Farl Powers (1948–1992), and the relationship between her and Muldoon in the early 1980s. 'Yarrow' commemorates Muldoon's mother Brigid Reagan (1920–1974). 'Milkweed and Monarch' meditates upon the passing away of his mother and father, Patrick Muldoon (1910–1985). Elegies and commemorations run consistently and creatively throughout Muldoon's poetry. The dedication in *New Weather*, his debut collection from 1973, states 'for my Fathers and Mothers,' in what Kendall terms a 'polycentric pedigree' for a volume that includes 'The Waking Father,' the proleptic lamentation of paternal death.[24] It is noticeable that the dedication in *New Weather* gives priority to the father. Muldoon's father appears at an earlier point and more continuously throughout the poetry than his mother. Elegies and commemorations of his father(s) include the fine and surreal elegies 'The Fox,' 'Brock' and 'The Coney' (MTB, 3, 12, 24), the cryptic 'The Mirror' (Q, 2–13), the poetic meditations on the origins and absence of a father in 'Immrama' and 'Immram' (WBL, 23, 38–48). Muldoon's speculations on an alternative life of a father and the unbirth of the son in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' in the next volume *Hay* (109–140) also deal with aspects of his father(s). Additionally, the entire volume *Meeting the British* is written 'In memory of Patrick Muldoon

23 William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1789] 1985), 162; Wiliam Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (New York: W.W. Norton, [1850] 1979), 599.

24 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 23.

1910–1985' and shades of and references to father figures ghost many other poems. A range of other verses includes memories of a living father.[25] Conversely, poems about his deceased mother(s) are fewer and further between, although she too appears as a live person in some earlier poems, for example 'Ma' and 'The Mixed Marriage' (*M*, 23, 42). This distance to mothers, the female and the feminine is also noticeable in the later dead-pan quip in the aptly – entitled 'Errata:' 'For "mother" read "other"' (*H*, 88). The persona's mistaking of 'his mother's name, "Regan", for "Anger"' also expresses ambivalent relations to his mother in this volume's 'Milkweed and Monarch', an elegy for his father and mother in which 'he could barely tell one from the other' (10–11). Previous and later elegies for family and friends range from 'My Grandfather's Wake' (MTB, 5), 'Turkey Buzzards' for his sister Maureen (*HL*, 78–82), 'The Soap' for his friend and BBC colleague Michael Heffernan (MTB, 25–29), 'Sillyhow Stride' for friend and rock musician Warren Zevon (*HL*, 95–107) to 'Cuthbert and the Otters' (OTTWK, 3–13) in memory of Seamus Heaney. Commemorations of other writers, both living and dead, in all sorts of manners, from the directly referential to the cryptic and coded, require another book.[26] The elegiac stance dominates this volume. 'Incantata' mourns the death of Mary Farl Powers, renowned artist and Muldoon's former partner and 'Milkweed and Monarch' attends to the loss of his father and mother. *The Annals of Chile* is, however, written 'In Memory of Brigid Reegan (1920–1974) and Muldoon's elegy for his mother takes up more than three quarters of the entire book.

'Milkweed and Monarch,' judged by its contents in a volume dominated by elegies dedicated to his mother, is most certainly a tribute to Muldoon's parents, but, in typical Muldoonesque manner, it is unusual, bewildering and wide-ranging. This poem links directly up with the combat of parental skeletons in the previous poem, 'Oscar,' in which the mother's skeleton 'has managed to worm / its way back on top of the old man's / and she once again has him under her thumb' (9). In many ways 'Milkweed and Monarch' also continues the commemoration 'for my mothers and fathers,' 'the polycentric pedigrees,' from *New Weather*.[27] This time around, both parents are remembered in

25 For a wider view on fathers and the importance of the past in Muldoon's and Northern Irish poetry at the time, see Edna Longley, '"When Did You Last See Your Father?" Preoccupations of the Past in Northern Irish Writing 1965–1985,' in *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, 150–173.

26 Muldoon's references range from the accessible to the arcane. They can be best traced in his own creative criticism, in *To Ireland, I* and *The End of the Poem*.

27 The first page caption of *New Weather* states 'for my Fathers and Mothers' and Kendall terms this a 'polycentric pedigree.' Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 23.

a single poem of as much paradox and ambivalence as compassion and grief. The choice of the villanelle form links these elegiac verses with such predecessors as Dylan Thomas' 'Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night,' Robert Frost's 'Acquainted with the Night,' Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art' and Heaney's 'Villanelle for an Anniversary.' Etymologically and traditionally, the term 'villanelle' derives from the Italian *villanella*, referring to a rustic song and dance, strongly associated with the pastoral genre, and the medieaval *villein*, in the sense of serf, tenant and bondsman. Its standard form is a nineteen-line poem in five tercets and a conclusive quatrain in a variety of metre, normally tri- or tetrameter, with two refrains and two repetitive rhymes. Its fixed form has a bell-ringing quality, and the refrains and repetitions represent remembrance and the cycles of seasons, life and death. Its pastoral roots suit the setting of graveyard, soil and plants. There is, however, little doubt that Muldoon is, as always, also aware of the modern spelling of *villain* and its connotations: irreverent, self-aware and iconoclastic. Muldoon charges the rustic song of the pastoral tradition with a sense of dance and villany in a homage to parents set by the grave, in an tradition-breaking villanelle in 25 lines of seven tercets and a conclusive quatrain in mixed metre with two refrains and a very subtle chime pattern. His attention to two deceased subjects in such doubleness of meaning and form adds to the regeneration of the genre. Furthermore, Muldoon's language emphasises the sense of doubleness and ambivalence in the elegiac mood of this villanelle.

If deconstruction might be simplistically labeled as the psychoanalysis of language, the Derridean method meets its match in Muldoon's elegy. Connectivity and confrontations in the title reveal the complexity of this contorted villanelle. Alliteration and the symbiosis of flower and butterfly in milkweed and monarch unite the subjects of the title with mellifluous melody and natural harmony. This combination indicates matrimonial bliss. The two words also coalesce, as milkweed butterfly and monarch are two terms for the same insect. It is also notoriously difficult to tell one gender from the other of the monarch. However, contradictory connotations indicate conflict. The title, in its linguistic polysemy, also carves out division and difference, such as the separation of realms between plant and patriarch, vegetation under the sovereignty of an absolute ruler of state. Or perhaps that should be plant and matriarch, the two title words are gender neutral. Both words are, nevertheless, also divided against themselves: the sense of liquid nutrition and cumbersome vegetation in milk-weed suggests maternal care, wildness and parasitism, just as monarch suggests butterfly and sovereign. Consequently, the title captures simultaneously the conjugal aspects and the conflict of marriage and partnership.

As he knelt by the grave of his mother and father
the taste of dill, or tarragon –
he could barely tell one from the other –

filled his mouth. It seemed as if he might smother. (10)

Meditations at the tomb precipitate suffocation on the part of the mourner. Memories are too painful to bear and the integration of 'mother' in 'smother' hints more at the mother's *dis*abling than enabling care. But 'other' half-rhymes with 'father' as well and the persona can barely distinguish between the two. A form of psychological reversion and displacement occurs as aural connections impinge themselves on the evocation of his parents. These resonances are linked with previous domestic meals and a taste for life. The binarism and polysemy of the title also structure the bifurcated bonding and contradictory semantics of 'dill, or tarragon,' plants from different parts of the world that are both used to add flavour to food. On a metaphorical level they both imply supplantation, the suppression or displacement of one thing by another – existence, gender, emotions, semantics – and transformation – from seed to plant to spice – processes embedded continuously in the poem. 'Dill,' according to the Oxford English Dictionary, could also mean, among other things, a girl or wench; dole, grief and mourning; sea-weed and fool – a string of words which tends to encapsulate many of the poem's persons, and much of its situation, sorrow and transformations. That some of these usages are obsolete adds to the sense of passing and the past. 'Tarragon,' the name of another exotic plant and spice, illustrates in a single word – wittily or not – much of this volume's many motifs, traces and cryptic methods, as well as this poem's linguistic undecidability, multiple shades of grief and complex renewal. 'Tarragon' contains an assonantal echo with *terra* gone and sings in itself a lament to the many soils, territories and terrains that are gone, and the *terra incognita* to come. 'Tarragon' also ghosts with assonance the Gaelic exclamation of grief and sorrow, *ochone*. All merriment has disappeared, arrah gone. 'Tarragon' states explicitly in its four final letters the painful struggle, psychological conflict and verbal contest in ancient Greek drama, *agon*. 'Tarragon' chimes in its second half with 'again' as a phonetic involution of this poem's recollection and renewal of the deceased in the life of the living, and also of this volume's many refrains of remembrance: 'Again and again,' 'All I remember,' 'All would be swept away.' The scream of sorrow echoes in the disappearance of traditional landscape and historical grandeur: Tara gone! 'Tarragon' also records the previous sounds and transformative encounters on foreign territory of

Muldoon's own idiom: the play on Aragon and r-g-n in 'Sushi' in *Meeting the British* (34–35). This plaintive poetics also reaches back to Yeats's commemoration of a glorious past and its gone heroes in 'Easter 1916,' and to Joyce's universal sorrow for all the living and all the dead in his concluding story in *Dubliners*: 'The Dead.' Yet 'Tarragon' keeps these old remains alive. Like new spice to traditional food, the semantic vitality, the linguistic tangibility and the formal innovations of this extended villanelle add life and renewal to old verses, to Muldoon's own elegy, to the convention of elegy and the villanelle form, to the commemoration of parents and to the memory of Patrick and Brigid Muldoon. Furthermore, 'Tarragon' connects with 'Estragon,' its French synonym and the vagabond in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* that tramps about in 'Incantata,' Muldoon's elegy for Mary Farl Powers that follows on the next pages.

'Milkweed and Monarch' prolongs in its poetic ingenuity the life of two parents. Its linguistic introspection, lexical multivalence and its triumphant use of the villanelle form give contention and chaos to the deceased, and to the mourner. Muldoon's elegy is unusual in its mourning of two subjects in the same poem. Commemoration of parents in Muldoon's elegy also offers a provocative portrait of the parents. This is a very post-Freudian elegy, full of ambivalence, confusion and projection in a tradition where *amour*, compassion and dejection have been standard emotions. The mother tends to be presented as a conveyor of suffocation and aggression – 'He'd mistaken his mother's name, "Reagan," for "Anger"' – as much as dedication and affection. But then, again, 'he could barely tell one from the other' (11). The confusion of emotion extends from familial ambivalence to erotic desire: 'Why should he be stricken / with grief, not for his mother and father, // but a woman slinking from the fur of a sea-otter / in Portland Maine, or, yes, Portland, Oregon –' (10). Erotic desire for a woman replaces Oedipal ambivalences and geographical duplicity emphasises emotional confusion. Ambivalence of maternity later extends to Mother Ireland and undefined forms of motherhood in the assonantal patternings of 'mother,' 'Irish Cliffs of Moher' and 'other' – which by its chime with 'otter' reconnects with the woman from Portland.[28] 'Father' also belongs to this semiotic chain of likening and differing and this cycle of psychological, linguistic and geographical supplementation extends to the confusions of sex and identity: 'As he knelt by the grave of his mother and father / he could barely tell one

28 For a pictorial presentation of motherhood as a site of ideological struggle of family, church and motherland, see Rita Duffy, *Mother Ireland,* 1989.
Muldoon and Duffy have collaborated on such projects as *Cloth* and *Thaw*. Duffy's *Watchtower 2* (2006) appears on the jacket image of Muldoon's *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing.* One of the poems in the volume has the title: 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower II*' For more information on Duffy and Muldoon, see http://www.stoneyroadpress.com/books/at-sixes-and-sevens/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qi6peCAERM

from the other.' The death of parents leaves an empty emotional space where the striving towards new language and novel form attempts to recover some of the loss. These continual displacements of language, form, identity and memory remove most sense of stability in the stern confrontation with the unknowable, and they personalise the excruciation of loss. Alphabetic computations, contorted composition and multiple confusions in 'Milkweed and Monarch' function to conceptualise the specifically individual in a situation that affects all mortals: death is singular and mourning unique. But both conditions are boundless and polymorphous. The emotional turmoil is expressed from a third person point of view, as if the speaking subject is striving to distance himself from the situation. The mourner removes himself from the loss that makes him lose himself in despair, a sense of slipping away of parents and the past, and of language and self, which appears again and again in intransitive idioms and mutable notions: 'For "mother" read "other,"' and 'For "feather" read "father,"' state the corrective 'Errata' in the next volume *Hay* (88).

'Milkweed and Monarch' tries to come to terms with death and grief in mould-breaking verses. The poem expresses anger, hate and the painfulness of death and mourning, as much as sympathy, love and grace. The poem breaches the convention of how to speak of the dead. 'Milkweed and Monarch' adds new life to the catalogue of commemoration, but as a personal elegy for his own parents these lines might sound to many readers as 'cold and passionate as the dawn' in Yeats's 'The Fisherman.'

'Incantata' expresses in excruciating evocations the loss of love, life and art in the passing away of Mary Farl Powers with considerably more heartfelt torment than 'Milkweed and Monarch.' The direct address by the speaking subject to the deceased subject resounds with desperation and lament. Muldoon's scream 'builds from pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt, / a monument to the human heart' (19). Mary Farl Powers (1948–1992) was one of the most important printmakers in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century.[29] Powers and Muldoon had a relationship over a number of years in the early 1980s. The spirit of their relationship might enter into many of the poems in *Quoof*. Her art certainly inspires Muldoon's ekphrastic poem 'Mary Farl Powers *Pink Spotted Torso*' (*Q*, 20). The title is taken from one of her potato prints and the technique and non-figurative motif of Powers's image imprint themselves on Muldoon's poem. This rendition on Powers's print, a prelude to the celebratory eulogy of her, 'Incantata,' appears inaccessible, elliptic and indirect.

29 For a presentation of Powers and her art, see Brian Lalor, *Ink-Stained Hands: Graphic Studio Dublin and the Origins of Fine-Art Printmaking in Ireland* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2011), 131–140.

Creative processes of carving and printing shape the poem's stanzas and caesurae, which are hard to align in a single interpretation. A portrait of the artist with her instrument, a potato, in the first stanza remains isolated from images of Minnesota and fragmentary snap shots of a survivor painfully extracting himself out of a car crash in the second and third stanzas. The poem's abstraction, discontinuity and dislocation appear to be taken from Powers's print, her birthplace and possible traumatic episodes in her own life. The idea of printing, the technique of carving out of images and possibly the colour pink unite the three stanzas of the poem. Powers's print and Muldoon's poem also connect in the challenge of artistic articulation in poetry and painting, and in the sympathetic battle between the two as expressed in the proverb that a picture says more than a thousand words. As an analogy for the creative act of writing – the emptiness of the white space, the clash of representation and imagination, the tugs of tradition and innovation, the concerns for form and technique, the questions of framing – the art of painting presents a plethora of similar problems to the sibling art of poetry.[30]

Muldoon and Powers ended their relationship after a few years. A sense of break-up and leaving informs the 1984 pamphlet *The Wishbone* and some of the poems in *Meeting the British*, for example 'The Marriage of Strongbow and

30 For some of Muldoon's other ekphrastic poems and allusions to the visual arts, see 'The Bearded Woman, by Ribera' (*NW*, 38); 'Edward Kienholz *The State Hospital'* (*Q*, 21); 'Christo's,' 'Paul Klee *They're Biting'* and 'Salvador' (*MTB*, 21, 32, 49–51); 'Incantata' (*AC*, 13–29); 'The Plot,' 'A Half-Door near Cluny' (*H*, 15, 103); 'John Luke *The Fox,'* 'Anthony Green: *The Second Marriage,'* 'Homesickness' (*MSG*, 31, 32, 63–64); 'Sandro Botticelli: The Adoration of the Magi,' 'Francois Boucher: Arion on Dolphin,' (*M*, 15, 36); *Kerry Slides* (1996) with Bill Doyle; *Cloth* (2007) with Rita Duffy; *Wayside Shrines* (2009) with Keith Wilson; *Plan B* (2009) with Norman McBeath. Numerous other poems contain references and allusions to paintings, film and visual arts. A large number of his books have jacket designs by visual artists. For other views on the links between poetry and painting in Northern Irish poetry, see also Ruben Moi, 'Verse, Visuality and Vision: The Challenges of Ekphrasis in Ciaran Carson's Poetry,' in *The Crossings of Art in Ireland*, ed. Ruben Moi, Brynhildur Boyce, and Charles I. Armstrong (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 235–261; '"Drawn by the Colour and Light": Ekphrases and Aesthetics in the Poetics of Derek Mahon,' in *Beyond Ireland: Encounters across Cultures*, ed. Hadda Friberg-Harnesk, Gerald Porter, and Joakim Wrethed (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 181–197. For 'the visual turn' in literature and culture, see Michel Foucault's meditations upon Velázquez' in *Las Meninas* at the beginning of Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Mieke Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Aoife,' 'Gone,' and 'Sushi.' Powers died of cancer in 1992. 'Incantata' reveals unusually unconcealed intimate details and private memories of personal traits, primarily of Powers but also of Muldoon himself, and delineates their relationship with affection, humour and gravitas. Muldoon portrays the sang-froid of Powers in the face of a bomb-blast, her intelligence and dedication as an artist, her fatalism in denying herself much-needed medical treatment and her heroic endurance of disease, disintegration, death. He also reveals her fear of canned goods, her 'fervent eschewal of stockings and socks' (24), and her naming of Muldoon as 'Polyester' due to airs of 'too much artificiality, both as man and poet' (17). In turn, Muldoon depicts himself as trembling at the bomb-blast, as immature party lion and erudite conversationalist. Various verses celebrate their spiritual companionship, dining together and nights out and drives out, but also point to differences and infidelities. A more unguarded autobiographical engagement than has been customary in Muldoon's previous poetry imbues his keen with heart-rendering pain. Unsentimental and secularised, the eulogy refrains from metaphysical speculations, but ends on an apotheosis of art familiar from modernist aesthetics.

'Incantata' celebrates and commemorates Powers, their relationship and her art with resounding pain, formidable form and remarkable language. 'Incantata,' also directly inspired by Powers's art, has a much more accessible tone and recognisable form than 'Mary Farl Powers *Pink Spotted Torso.*' Muldoon has chosen to add variation to the eight-line stanza pattern of Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and Cowley's 'On the Death of Mr William Harvey.' The number of stanzas, forty-five, attempts to prolong by numerological representation Powers's life span of forty-four years, and to make the total number of verses come full circle, three hundred and sixty degrees, in order to encompass the endless but relentless cycle of death, and of life and the circular repetitions of sorrows. In these respects, 'Incantata,' Muldoon's neologistic title word, strikes in itself the multiple sounds and senses of an alphabetic orchestra. 'I,' the primary letter, sets the speaking subject first in the swirls of sounds and significance to follow. 'In,' as a prefixal and prepositional prelude, suggests stasis in space, place, time, emotion and mind, but also process and motion from these locations to somewhere else. 'Inc,' signals determination to include everything as part of a whole, to unite in one body the fate of the two lovers, the dead and the bereaved, and to form a legal corporation against the institution of metaphysical injustice – the death and separation of the living. 'Inc' is audibly inseparable from ink, the fluid that unites the two lovers in art and beyond: 'in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink' (28). 'Inca,' as in an extinct civilisation of Indians, suitably refers the death of Powers back to

Muldoon's early elegy for the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe in Calfornia in *New Weather*, 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi.' The intratextual reference bestows upon Powers the pride and probity of Ishi in the stern face of death and extinction. 'Incantata,' also intones many other moods and modes, and functions as a minimalist score for this symphony of sounds and semiotics. The title plays in and on musicology, in cantata as well as in memory. Cantata: 'Originally, a narrative in verse set to recitative, or alternate recitative and air, for a single voice, accompanied by one or more instruments; now applied to a choral work, either sacred and resembling an oratorio but shorter, or secular, as a lyric drama set to music but not intended to be acted,' explains the Oxford English Dictionary. In music, then, the neologistic title signals creative renewal as much as commemorative recollection in these heart-rending lines of pain and pathos. 'Incantata' also echoes cantos, for example Ezra Pound's, in a poem that shares with the American modernist's song the inclusion of other languages than English, a concentration on cultural artefacts, a large span of geographical and historical references, an intermittent need for encyclopedic support, and a conviction that the poetic form generates significance in and of itself. 'Cant,' the middle section of the word, sounds like thieves' patter in a poem where Muldoon steals like a magpie from the scores of music, poetry, literature, painting, the arts, as if nothing suffices to fill the abyss of loss and alienation in the aftermath of Powers's death. 'Cant' also strikes a note of hypocritical and sanctimonious talk to imply that the rites and rituals of commemoration and funerals do not always remedy the desperation and grief of the bereaved in the wake of death. The title's play on phraseology and liturgy also includes an appropriate note of failure and resignation. 'Cant' reads like misspelled 'chant.' 'Cant' also sounds like the contraction of 'cannot,' in this cant-piece between life, love, death, sorrow and after-life. One can't go one. 'Incantata' sings the sounds of music, failure and impossibility. 'If music be the food of love, play on,' Duke Orsino of Illyria states in the opening verses of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, but what if you can't? 'Tata,' the ending of the title, chants in its monosyllabic repetition the monotony of melancholy. On the other hand, the ending also signals a sense of continuance, unstopped repetition, alongside intimations of nursery expressions and a colloquial childlike idiom for parting: 'Incantata' – in the ability, or the inability, of saying goodbye. Such a childlike note integrates mollifying terms of endearment and almost comic relief to the overwhelming indignation and anger. Furthermore, the assonance of the tetrasyllabic title almost adds arias in the word, pauses of sonority and reflection in the consonantal one word alphabetic narrative of drama and pathos. 'Incantata,' in its mellifluousness, composition and form,

screams with love for Powers, for her art, and for the time they spent together. 'Incantata' begins:

> I thought of you tonight, *a leanbh*, lying there in your barrow
> colder and dumber than a fish by Francisco de Herrera,
> as I X-Actoed from a spud the Inca
> glyph for a mouth: thought of that first time I saw your pink
> spotted torso, distant-near as a nautilus,
> when you undid your portfolio, yes indeedy,
> and held the print of what looked like a cankered potato
> at arms length – your arms being longer, it seemed, than Lugh's. (13)

Sounds and rhythms in the title develop towards a crescendo throughout the poem. The first stanza reaches directly to the heart of the matter, the love for Powers and the stimulation of her prints for Muldoon's life and poem. 'Pink spotted torso' recalls Muldoon's epigenous poem to Powers in *Quoof*, and names one of her engravings. The words also allude to a deceased body. Powers's death and silent art are inserted into a larger picture by references to the sculptured marks of the bygone Inca culture and the art of the painter, engraver and founder of the Seville school in painting, Francisco de Herrera (1576–1656). Powers's potato printing technique connects the two artists, in life, in art and in Muldoon's previous poems. Significantly, the potato yields the form of a mouth, the human organ for tender intimacy and for vocal expression. It functions as an enigmatic emblem of a silent and speechless organ of articulation, but also as a manifestation of other types of communication beyond the sign systems of sound and script. The potato mouth also appears as the auditory counterpoint to the nightmarish visions that unfold via the retinagraph in 'Madoc.' The dislocated mouth of the 'X-actoed' potato resembles strongly the disembodied mouth of *Not, I, – Pas Moi* – Beckett's visceral play of trauma and inarticulation of an unnamed and suffering subject in apparent metaphysical limbo. Beckett's art appears like pink spots throughout the entire poem. 'Colder and dumber than a fish,' in the clause that links Powers to Herrera, connects Muldoon's verses appositely to the dilemma of dedication and distraction in Yeats's lamentation 'All Things Can Tempt Me.' Lexicon and reference continue to connect Powers's print and Muldoon's poem to Irish culture. 'A leanbh,' Gaelic term of endearment meaning 'O Child,' signals premature death and new afterlife. Writing, etching, vocality and commemoration are tied to a mythological dimension in the mentioning of 'Lugh,' god of arts and crafts, an allusion that extends to the pre-Christian festival Lughnasa,

inaugurated by Lugh to commemorate his foster mother, Ethniu, and to celebrate the harvest.[31] 'Cankered potato,' in which 'can' spreads like contagion from Incantata, captures the cancerous attack on Powers's health, alludes to the plethora of associations with potato in Irish history and literature, and commences the linguistic disintegration to come later in the poem.

As Powers dies by cancer, stanza by stanza, the coping strategy and emotional equilibrium maintained by reference to the longevity of arts give way to inarticulate pain and linguistic apoplexy:

> The fact that you were determined to cut yourself off in your prime
> because it was *pre*-determined has my eyes abrim:
> I crouch with Belacqua
> and Lucky and Pozzo in the Acacacac-
> ademy of Anthropopopometry, trying to make sense of the '*quaquaqua*'
> of that potato-mouth; that mouth as prim
> and proper as it's full of self-opprobrium,
> with its '*quaquaqua*', with its 'Quoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiq.' (20)

This dissolution of dirge into illinguisticity in the penultimate stanza of the first section, stanza number 23, presents disease, pain and death by disintegration of ordinary language, paroxysmic adlinguisticity and the expansion of metre. The force of repetition of insensible syllables, a failure of language in the conventional sense of dictionary words and logical communication, animates the disorderly aggression of abnormal cell growth and lethal cancer in its rapid metastasis of lexical aberration. These hacked repetitions also stutter the unstutterable and capture the cataleptic crisis of insanity, arrythmia, infarction and haemorrhage – the inabilities of language and the confusion of pathological symptoms that may take their grip upon the bereaved. These lines, in their extension of metre beyond any type of ordinary metrics and prosody, imply the infinitude of the loss, and demonstrate a drive for transcendence.

Most pertinently, metaphysical quandary, and its linguistic articulation thereof, are linked by allusion and alphabetic associations to a Beckettian and Joycean universe. Lucky and Pozzo stride straight into Muldoon's stanza from *Waiting for Godot*. 'There's no lack of void,' states Estragon in the same play, and later adds: 'We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we

31 Brian Friel enacts the same myth in his partly autobiographical play dealing with the family and the emotional nature of individual memory in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

exist.' Both characters and comments entwine 'Incantata' with Beckett's plays and their panoramic futility, as does a number of other sentences in Muldoon's poem: '(remember how Krapp looks up "viduity"?),' 'His Nibs Sam Bethicket,' 'the idea I shared with Vladimir and Estrago,' 'the Thane of Calder,' 'Hamm and Cloc; Nagg and Nell; Watt and Knott,' 'Watt remembering the "*Krak! Krek! Krik!*,"' 'FitzKrapp eating his banana' (14, 15, 17, 25). Beckett's despairing examination of the human condition, his excruciating reflections upon the problems of divinity and free will, the physical disintegration in his plays and novels and their grim humor alongside the inevitability of death that his work recalls bear heavily upon Muldoon's apprehension of Powers's fate. The mnemonic device of the potato mouth – Muldoon's madeleine in remembrance of things past – also imprints the verses with Beckett's discussion of voluntary and involuntary memory.[32] Joyce is interpellated too, with *The Dead* of course, but even more *Finnagans Wake* via suggestions of the multilinguistic vitality of a spirit that will not surrender. The mobility of citations – Muldoon's own verses, Powers's art, Beckett and Joyce's universe – is richly suggestive: other acts ensue, the wake continues, 'Incantata' goes on.

These lines, *mortilineal lines*, also, in their attempt to apprehend the incomprehensibility of death, to alphabetise anguish, to formulate the inarticulate and to prolong the life of the dead in the life of the living, offer no termination and closure. Stanza twenty-three gives way to stanza twenty-four, the poem's transitional stanza of stop and continuation, death and afterlife, as another segment in the semantic chain of substitutions and displacements trying to come to terms with disease, pain, death and sorrow. 'That's all that's left of,' starts stanza twenty-four, and searches incessantly for the correct vehicle for the prepositional tenor in the stanzas to come. 'Of the great big dishes of chicken lo mein,' 'Of the bride carried over the threshold,' 'Of the Belfast school,' continue stanza after stanza in ceaseless scrutiny of relics, remnants and remembrances. The elegy moves on from the personal to the public to echo the loss of Powers on a larger scale of ruins, remnants and revenants in the consequent twenty octaves that follow:

> all that's left of the hogweed and horehound and cuckoo-pint,
> of the eighteen soldiers dead at Warrenpoint (21)
> [...]

32 See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965 [1956]), 66, 69; *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, [1950–2] 1976); *Collected Shorter Plays*, 1st hardcover ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1984). See also his *Trilogy, Collected Shorter Plays* and *Proust* (London,: Chatto & Windus, 1931).

> of the remnants of Airey Neave, of the remnants of Mountbatten, (22)
> [...]
> of Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae*, with its gut-wrenching viola,
> of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, of Frankie Valli's,
> of Braque's great painting *The Shower of Rain*,
> of the fizzy, lemon or sherbet-green *Ranus ranus*
> plonked down in Trinity like a little Naugahyde pouffe,
> of eighteen soldiers dead in Oriel, (23)

Natural cycles of death and rebirth, chronicles of political murder and records of art augment and countervail the fate of Powers, and relate the distress of individual loss to individual creativity, wars, historical change and aesthetic endurance. Powers's memorable lithographs and Muldoon's poetic vitality empower an artistic embrace beyond subjectivity and death in conciliatory notes at the end of the verse cycle:

> than that Lugh of the Long Arm might have found in the midst of *lus na leac* or *lus na treatha* or *Frannc-lus*,
> in the midst of eyebright, or speedwell, or tansy, an antidote,
> than that this *Incantata*
> might have you look up from your plate of copper or zinc
> on which you've etched the row upon row
> of army-worms, than that might reach out, arrah,
> and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink. (28)

The final lines return to the opening lines in their attention to Powers, her art and their importance for Muldoon, in verses that revert to the same myth of Lugh and include the Gaelic language. Life and commemoration are preserved by the naming of flowers, which could be both vernal and vital, or an herbarium. The plant names are given in both English and Gaelic, as if to see things through two languages, as if two languages might help to render legible the two dimensions of life and death, and the complexities of rendering sorrow and commemoration in creative language. The catalogue of flowers connects with the potato of the first stanza, but the mouth in Powers's initial print has been replaced by 'army-worms' – a grotesque image of death and renewal. These pestiferous insects are capable of skeletonising entire crops, but they also retain the idea of chrysalis and metamorphosis. Worm-like figures appear in some of Powers's etchings, for example 'Emblements' and 'Red in the Green.'[33]

33 Mary Farl Powers, *Emblements,* 1981. 39 x 48 cm; *Red in the Green,* 1975. 36.5 × 30.5 cm.

Their literary reference ranges from The Book of Job's 'How much less man, that is a worm? And the son of man, which is a worm? (25:6) to Beckett's *The Unnamable* and to Muldoon's later volume, *Maggot* (2010). Worms crawl as the great equaliser in the final stanza of 'Incantata.' Silent and insidious, they creep relentlessly on to complete the cycle from dust to dust. 'Arrah,' Mary's gone. Yet the dead and the mourner unite in their manual paraphernalia, the ink of etching and writing, and in the art of print and poetry that remains long after the artist is gone. Chiasmus in the final line, reminiscent of 'the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and all the dead' in the ultimate line of Joyce's 'The Dead,' assigns parity of esteem to both subjects, bestows spiritual unity across the artistic and existential boundaries between them, and implies imminent reversal of fate: the mourner and the reader will some day be included in the realm of the dead.

In scope and compassion the superbly composed euphonious enchantments of 'Incantata' constitute a poetic pantheon to Powers. Private endearments, paroxysms of emotion and intense grief of personal loss are contained in the poem by repetitive rhythms and aesthetic fortitude. The strengths of love, of word print and of sound present Powers and Muldoon's unity for posterity. Frequently, the nakedly autobiographical and the painfully personal cut straight through the high artifice: Paul speaks directly to Mary. In this respect, 'Incantata' is in dialogue with the later poem 'The Grand Conversation' (MSG, 41), a markedly more impersonal, circumspect and disunited colloquy on the positions of love and partnership in the midst of larger discourses. 'Incantata,' however, overflows with agony and desperation in its elegiac effusions where 'The Grand Conversation' checks its emotions and guards its cerebral cynosure. Colourings of relinquishment, abandon and abundance in 'Incantata' recall time and time again their lost love and their sustained affinities against a panorama of war, futility and Beckettian ghosts of nihilism. Allusions, art, alphaphilia implode to fill the emotional void and the creative vacuum left by her death. These mortilineal energies are contained by a stanzaic permanence that stems from Cowley and Yeats's elegies, and by numerological patterning. A polysemantic and multilingual language conveys the complexities of death and sorrow, and enacts an indefatigable quest for a linguistic mode in which they might be communicated. Three hundred and sixty lines define a full compass circle – life cycle and aesthetic completion – and forty-five stanzas exceed the forty-four year life span of Powers by one. The first suite of twenty-four stanzas contain the beginning and end of life, lines and language and the final twenty-one octaves vociferate to extend life, lines and language beyond the end and into the new millennium, the 21st century. Muldoon's 'Incantata'

in-un-dates the death of Powers in 1992 with personal memories and idiosyncratic language that place firmly Powers, her art and the relationship between them in the contemporary canon of commemoration.

'Yarrow,' the long good-bye to his mother, extends over the last hundred and fifty pages of this volume as an effusive elegy. Muldoon commemorates her death by cancer in 1974 with much of the same linguistic creativity and stanzaic assurance as previous elegies and birth poems in this volume. The length of time between his mother's death and these verses, as well as the length and the intricacy of the poem itself, suggest a more ambivalent relationship between mother and son than between father and son. Previous poems on his mother corroborate such a suspicion, as does the fact that the commemorative poems to his father appeared much closer in time to his death, and were, judged by Muldoon's own standards, less expansive and complex. Lines in 'Yarrow' also incorporate Kendall's 'polycentric pedigree', the introductory dedication in *New Weather:* 'for my Fathers and Mothers.' This later memorial poem connects more with the equivocal, bewildered and interchanging positions of 'Milkweed and Monarch' than the direct, intense and intimate confessions of 'Incantata.' Nevertheless, this elegy too belongs to the canon of contemporary commemoration in its expansive scale, epic range of reference and, perhaps most of all, in its idiosyncratic interrogation of lexical norms and digressive semantics.

'Yarrow,' like 'Quoof,' 'Madoc' and 'Incantata,' harbours multiple meanings within itself, like an oak within the acorn. Yarrow names a plant. *Achillea millefolium*, also called milfoil, nosebleed and kale, the strong-scented Eurasian plant of the daisy family. With its mythic connotations (Achilles used the plant for blood stanching), curative capacities and biomorphic qualities, it embodies many aspects of the poem's evolutions and preoccupations. *Achillea millefolium*, a fast-spreading plant of loose rosettes of leaves with no central head, configures the germination of these thousand or more verses, and reflects the nature of loss and memory: 'the line of chafers and cheeselips that overthrow as they undermine,' as grafted words in 'Third Epistle to Timothy' in the next volume *Hay* (101) state. These plants symbolise linguistic fertilisation, an ambivalent form of organicist poetics, the sprigs of memory, the intrusion of natural forces upon manmade culture and, more insidiously, the spreading of cancer. Yarrow, contrarily, also designates Yarrow Water on the Borders in the southeast of Scotland, a geographical reference that stirs ideas of the living stream and the passage of time, in addition to idiomatic fluency, linguistic fluidity and the flow of verse. Heraclitean philosophy of life, repetitions and change also flows with these connotations of aquacultural evanescence and eternity. Land and lake, flower and water, form oppositions in a larger universe, like life and

death from a metaphysical perspective, like the steadfast and the fleeting in the memory of the living of the dead and the past.

Yarrow also points to past poets, primarily Wordsworth's three poems ('Yarrow Unvisited' (1803), 'Yarrow Visited' (1814), and 'Yarrow Revisited' (1838)) that chart the imagined, the actual and the repeated experience of visiting Yarrow water and flora in the Scottish-English border region. These meditations upon deferred, realised and repeated experiences of life and poetry set up a Romantic backdrop for Muldoon's poem, which its Freudian psychology, many modernist references and coruscating language scepticism tend to overturn – like Yarrow that takes over fields that are under cultivation. Muldoon's 'Yarrow' swirls self-consciously and plurally and the title is indicative of the irreconcilable linguistics and heterogeneous allusions of this synaesthetic symphony that continues the expansive Muldoonian textuality that resists paraphrases.

'Yarrow' demonstrates as much formal renewal as linguistic renovation. Elaborate sound systems and numerological contrivance compose and constrain the semiotic swirls. A poetics of sestinas and terza rima imposes awe and order on the semantic slippage and the formlessness of loss and mourning. Stanzas in terza rima are ghosted by Dantean spirits of the diceased and the otherworld and sestinas propose a template for reiterations. Typographically, these tercets render an image of an endless flow of coffins. Their set shape also invites exchanges with Heaney's sonnets in memory of his mother, 'Clearances,' and the forms and transformations of the soul, language and poetry in 'Squarings.'[34] Language, form and internal references also connect 'Yarrow' with 'Incantata' and 'Milkweed and Monarch.' All three of them are elegies to two of the most important women in Muldoon's life. Both of them died from cancer. 'Yarrow' and 'Milkweed and Monarch' combine in numerous ways, for example in their biological imagery, implications of Oedipal drives, tenacious tercets and conflation of geography and women. In 'Milkweed and Monarch' the mother was confused with 'other,' 'Moher,' 'otter' and 'father,' and supplemented by the erotic recall of another woman. In 'Yarrow' the enigmatic figure S — configures, confronts and confuses the enabling and the moralising aspects of the protective mother. Nothing holds in 'Yarrow,' neither does the significance of S —, but the impetuosity and imprecations of this figure constitute some of the more sustained invectives and semiotic possibilities of this multi-faceted elegy. The mysterious S — of 'Yarrow,' just like the woman in 'Milkweed and Monarch,' 'must have gone off to Portland, Oregon / rather than Portland, like Maine' (168). 'Yarrow' and 'Incantata' also converge by creative means. Both poems abound in allusions to the fine arts and popular culture.

34 Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 24–33; *Seeing Things*, 53–113.

Muldoonian reference between them and to other poems are legion. '*Il Duce* of Drumcliff' (145), i.e. Yeats, looms large in these verses too, as the master to be overcome in encounters replete with Bloomian anxiety. The pantheon in which Muldoon composes his elegy for his mother, and several others, includes numerous other dead poets, for example T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Louis MacNeice, Sylvia Plath. 'Yarrow' and 'Incantata' repeat again and again the lives and memories the grieving persona tries to salvage from time and oblivion. They sing in relay in their many end words, and in their overtures of artistic reference, Muldoonian self-reference against a Yeatsian backdrop.

'Yarrow' derives its rhyme and sound scheme from 'Incantata.' End words in the first stanza of 'Incantata' that continue throughout the poem – 'barrow,' 'Herrera,' 'Inca,' 'pink,' 'nautilus,' 'indeedy,' 'potato,' 'Lugh' – also find echoes with the line endings of 'Yarrow' which are constituted in the first four tercets of the poem: 'row,' 'pink,' 'us,' 'da,' 'arm,' 'wheel,' 'tarp,' 'oil,' 'rare,' '*Deo,*' 'stream,' 'land' (39). These initial end sounds of the first twelve verses of 'Yarrow' reappear on seventeen occasions to introduce, structure and conclude the hundred and fifty stanzas in this sequence. In circular fashion, the rhymes and sounds of twelve terza rima sections in the envoi of 'Yarrow' hark back to its initial tercets, and to the chime words that also make up the three-hundred and sixty lines in 'Incantata.' Both poems accommodate the susurration, textual whorls, chime patterns and formal composition that characterise the language of Muldoon's poetry. This elaborate sound system, which connects 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow,' continues in the combinatory linguistics of family lives in 'The Mud Room,' 'Third Epistle to Timothy,' 'The Bangle' and 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' in the next volume *Hay* (3–10, 13, 97–103, 109–140). Some of the sounds still linger on in 'The Braggart' (MSG, 12) and 'The Humors of Hakone' (*Mag*, 63). Such a conflation, continuation and slipping away of sounds and systems unite the sorrows for the dead, and suggest the slippage of memory in time. 'Yarrow,' in itself and in its extensions, presents a panorama of phonetic panache that swirls with Muldoonian neologisms and ranges and roams in registers from the accessible to the arcane to honour, to preserve and to revivify the memory of Brigid Muldoon and other foremothers.

Yarrow's many meanings inhere in the title itself: the oak was once an acorn. Linguistically, Yarrow may derive from the Celtic word *garwy*, meaning rough, or may share a derivation with the English place name Jarrow from Old English *Gyrwum* for marsh dwellers. So the title term connotes tough plant and life's hardships, possibly in an Irish context, possibly in an English context – very relevant correspondences for an elegy with a plant as a dominant metaphor written by an Irish-Anglo-American master of language. A close reading of the term Yarrow suggests several interpretations. 'Ya' designates the age of a young adult, the period of a life time from which many of these memories of

Muldoon's mother are collected. 'Ya,' as a regional or colloquial variant of you, implies other distances and other relations than the 'I' that sets 'Incantata' going. Yarrow, the linguistic entity, contains missiles of love and death, as in Cupid's arrows and as weapons of war. Yarrow almost includes 'arrays,' as if to take in all the arrangements of diverse kinds and row after row of references and incessant ingenuity that, in their totality, endeavour to fill the emotional void of the loss in the mind of the living. Fittingly also, Yarrow half-rhymes in Muldoonesque manner with sorrow.

These kinds of lexical deconstruction and atomistic hermeneutics manifest themselves conspicuously in the poem in the semiotic shifts of the figure S —. S — upsets standard alphabetic usage and draws attention to its own appearance. It appears again and again in these lines like an empty signifier in continuously new contexts. Like a slithering snake in sweaty hands, the figure ceaselessly slips away from precariously established meaning and reshapes itself incessantly. Perhaps S — represents an (auto)biographical occlusion of self or refusal to name the self or the deceased. Most critics tend to assume as much.[35] While Kendall considers *The Annals of Chile* to be Muldoon's 'most candidly autobiographical' poem, and Wills complains that its 'wealth of cultural and autobiographical reference doesn't help to ground the poetry,' others have speculated on the signifiance of the figure S —. They have sought to exemplify what 'Yarrow' can release on the topics of sorrow, loss and language in non-biographical and less traditionally grounded interpretation.[36] S — abounds much more in interpretational plenitude than such affirmative logics proffered by Kendall and Wills would suggest. Its undecidablity enacts the emotions of love, loss and language. Effectively, the cipher functions as the tentative 'arresting officiffer,' to employ one of the numerous neologisms from 'Yarrow' (139), to stop and start, again and again, alphabetic initialisations and semiotic swirls in the stream of sorrows and memories. The focus on a single letter of a word in a grammatical unit of larger poetic narratives draws attention to the smaller situation and almost insignificant moments that survive in memory as much as the grand occasions.

S — starts significance
S — sets the signifier before the signified
S — shimmers with the secrets of syntax, semantics and shy self
S — shapes its own solecism

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35 See for example Norfolk, 'The Abundant Braes of Yarrow'; Bolton, 'Irish Stew at the Café De Monde'; Ford, '"Little Do We Know": Review of *the Annals of Chile* by Paul Muldoon'; Fenella Copplestone, 'Paul Muldoon and the Exploding Sestina,' *PN Review* 22, no. 2 (1995), 33–36.

36 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 209; Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 12.

S — suppurates the centrality of spelling and semantics
S — is if not sensuous then certainly curvaceous
S — slithers like a snake in the grass
S — chimes with slang for a specific anatomical attribute, with silly creatures and beasts of burden
S — strips silence to its initial, susurrates sonic subtleties, confounds morphological expectations, simulates and surpasses the ineffability of sadness and sorrow before death in this poem endorsed by Norfolk as 'a new kind of elegy, an elegy for the unborn and the dead alike.'[37]
S — streels with self-proclaimed sluttishness against lingual purity and moral stigmatisation: 'she shrugs off her taffeta / wither-band and begs me to, like rim / her for Land's sakes; instead of 'Lord', she says 'Land' (85)
S — signals its own sign and infinite possibilities in signature, event, context in a volume in which typical Muldoonian neologisms occur as spontaneous diversions without rules or regulations to precipitate their own possibilities of uncertain outcome
S — introduces a lot of other 'semioticonoclasts' (79): 'The Oklamydia Kid' (49) plays on the venereal legacy of the conquest of America, on Indian tribes and Western fictions in a quasi-confessional poem where the persona's memories of Irish childhood are already infested with Americana, and the young gun hooks up with S — who comes to host 'sores not unlike those of herp- / es or Chlamydia' (161). 'Elizabloodybeth' (84) inseminates the virginity and violence of courtly power play, plantation politics and the Irish Rising. 'Catlick' (136) configures linguistic equivocation religious denomination and sexual felinity. 'Labiaba- / ring' (150) exhibits Babylonian babble and pierced lips. Of both kinds. More often than not unscrupulous semiosis is, significantly, tied to sexual variance: lip service and acts of invagination. Sexuality implies the fertility, fatality and reckless risks of linguistic experimentation: in *The Annals of Chile* such methods might seem repellent and exhaustive, but they indubitably intensify and augment hermeneutic alternatives, like quoofing around
S — celebrates sensuous gratification and sex: 'and S — and I, like, outparamoured the Turk' (148)
S — soars sky-high with Dionysian revelry and Nietzschean vitalism
S — contrasts and conflates a number of deceased women in the book: the mother, Mary Farl Powers, Maud Gonne (Mise Eire), Myrna Loy and others
S — stretches to include father figures in the feminine catalogue
S —slinks in and out of the many positions of subject and object, serves as subjugator of semantic certainty as much as a supplier of coded significance,

37 Norfolk, 'The Abundant Braes of Yarrow,' 33.

slides with sameness, semblance and alterity in identitarian questions. S — counterpoints the mother, but the two also blend. S — seduces the persona into sex, drugs and dissipation; the mother exercises maternal care and protection: the two figures suggest images of Mother Ireland, Mother Mary, and sometimes they switch roles. Although the mother at times seems a stereotypical Jewish mother, she is closely associated with the traditional values of purity and religion in Northern Ireland: 'For your body is a temple' (68), 'For Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands' (90). S — stages melodramatically revolutionary republicanism, circulates the apocalyptic gospel of Dark Rosaleen, summates other heroines: 'Throughout all this she wears some kind of ski-hood or – mask' (86), 'her face in the freeze frame was not unlike Maud Gonne's (131), 'from Aghalane to Artigarvan to Articlave the Erne and the Foyle and the Bann must run red' (109). (At points S — and the mother are almost confused and they both suffer excruciating and drug-induced deaths, for entirely different reasons: heroine addiction and cancer. Contradictory and conflated, the two feminine figures subvert stable processes of identification and development.)

S — and the mother record the intensity and complexity of transient periods in the life and history of Northern/Ireland

S — sums up several of the stances in critical approaches to Muldoon's poetry

S — supports the poetry of Pablo Neruda in advocacy of politically committed poetry in a critically still unexplored template for *The Annals of Chile:* '"Take Neruda," S — volunteered, "a poet who dirtied his hands / like a *bona fide* minstrel boy / gone to the wars in Tacna-Arica"' (156)

S — scolds the persona, possibly a partial self-portrait of Muldoon, as much as other poets in Northern Ireland, with scathing scatological satire: 'You're just another Sir Pertinax / MacSychophant, / brown-nosing some Brit who's sitting on your face / and thinking it's, like, really cool' (163). If Muldoon is sanctioned for his even-handedness in his treatment of the Northern/Irish controversies, such impartiality is equaled by his sense of equivocation towards the demands of communal commitment in a partitioned society. Such accusations, self-generated, justified or not, stem from entrenched politico-theoretical priorities that ignore many aspects of Muldoon's poetry, or disapprove of its tendencies to criticise all sides, and exhibit a bias in favour of a homogenous type of poetic idiom. These accusations of self-indulgent solipsism also bridle at Muldoon's escape to luxurious academic positions in the United States. Northern Irish matters appear less prominent in Muldoon's middle oeuvre, and although these volumes attend with scepticism to ideological and historical formations of the U.S., they tend to be less vitriolic in their treatment of contemporary

American issues than other parts of his poetry are of issues in Northern Ireland. In effect S — operates as a dissenting voice in respect to special stances in poetics, not only of political commitment, but also of intense emotionalism:

> To find a pugilist-poet who'd tap his own prostate gland
> for the piss-and-vinegar ink
> in which he'd dash off a couplet of 'sparrow-
>
> songs', then jump headfirst into her fine how-d'-ye-do
> heedless of whether she'd used a deo-
> dorant, that was S — 's ideal (65)

Poet-boxer-art critic-dadaist Arthur Craven ('Artilutteur Ecrivain,' 'Agravain of the Hard Hand,' 'Agravyn à la Dyre Mayn,' 'Agravidos,'), Edith Piaf and Sylvia Plath belong to her poetic pantheon of which the persona is sceptical. S — sublimates the mortilineal school of suicides that infested parts of the modernist poetics and culminated in the fate of Plath and in Alvarez's call for the forces of disintegration and his meditations upon suicide.[38]
S — slits itself short, S — spells its own suicide, S —'s cessation is inscribed in the tumultuous contexts of pop lyrics by Beatles, sensational murder by Charles Manson and the biblical prophecies of Belshazzars's feast: 'S — wrote 'Helter-skelter' / in her own blood on the wall, she'd hidden a razor in her scrubs' (184). Symbolic and savage, the act of suicide counteracts maternal self-sacrifice, echoes the tragic fate of many modernist poets and artists and the self-depredation of rock and roll mythology, and proclaims the transitions of eras. Plath's tragic act of suicide strengthens the forces of life in the volume: the alternatives of suicide and sacrifice augment the individual's responsibility for life. On the other hand, was that only an unsuccessful suicide attempt as S — appears again and again after acts of termination and words of farewell?

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38 Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the *locus classicus* for the meditation upon existentialist suicide in the modernist era. Alvarez requests disturbed and darkened poetics in 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle,' the introduction to his anthology *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962). He also conducts a cultural analysis of suicide in *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). Muldoon's cerebral poetry tends to side with James Fenton's ironic retort to (Alvarez's) self-deprivative emotionalism: 'He tells you, in the sombrest notes, / If poets want to get their oats / The first step is to slit their throats. / The way to divide / The sheep of poetry from the goats / Is suicide.' Morrison and Motion, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, 13.

S — stains the verses with the iniquity and sin that many of a religious disposition will detect in these scenes
S — solicits censorial sanctions
S — suggests, perhaps, the solid spanking, which the 'perennial spoofer of false piety' might deserve[39]
S — certainly slams a person in the poem that sounds very much like Paul Muldoon: 'Thing is, a Phóil, your head's so far up your own fat butt / you've pretty much disappeared' (163) – the 'disappearing up his own bum' of *Quoof* (47)
S — sags and slumps with the squalor and seediness of subversive and subverted self-esteem
S —smacks of the stuff that sends the eponymous female figure in 'Yarrow' to the summits of sprightliness and to the slumps of self-depredation
S — slaughters, in its solitude and self-abnegation, Soroptimist International
S — signifies shamelessness in a collection that is suffused with Oedipal desire, salacious sex and insatiable textuality
S — surveys the catalogue of scandalous strumpets and strong and superior feminine figures in Muldoon's collections
S — surprises, shocks, sucks, suppurates and supplies 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' with a feminine counterpart
S — sallies forth on the seas of semiosis and the geotemporal and imaginative journeys that recall the circles and cycles of identifications and circumnavigations of travels in *Why Brownlee Left*, in particular 'Immram'
S — signals the alphabetisation of 'The Plot' in *Hay* and '@' in *Maggot* and shows the abced-minded Muldoonian methods
S — summarises the slips and slides, curves and cuts of 'Yarrow'
S — satirises and sexualises, much to the persona's chagrin, the saccharined lyricism of feminine voices in Yeats's 'Hound Voice' and the rose symbolism of '*Il Duce* of Drumcliff' (145) in deliberate misprision and misnaming to cut into the psychoanalytical depths of the Nobel Laureate's aristocratic mind and imagery, to point to fascist tendencies in his thinking, to chart the changes of feminist opprobrium and the figuring of the feminine in poetry: 'How dare you suggest that this "far-off, most secret /, and inviolate rose" is a cunt: / how dare you misread // his line about how they "all gave tongue;" / how dare you suggest that *Il Duce* of Drumcliff / meant that "Diana Vernon" and Maud Gonne gave good head' (145)

39 Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 211.

S — synthesises, splits and spools Muldoon's own textual ambivalences, and sorts out Yeats's legacy by keeping the Nobel Laureate's idiom current in continuous attempts of devaluation
S — scrutinises how spiritual sprightliness might vie with, or stem from, self-destruction, a template that runs in Muldoon's writing from the self-destructive forces in 'Wind and Tree' in *New Weather* to the abjection and seditious assaults on idealism in 'Madoc' (*Mad*, 15–261) and the ironic comments on old pieties in 'The Old Country' (*HL*, 38–46)
S — speculates in slang, Spanish, solecism and unsavory sexuality to unsettle sartorial eloquence, linguistic certainty, moral taste: 'I got from under S —'s cheese-cloth skirt / where what I'd taken for a nutmeg-clove // tasted now of monk's-hood, or anconite: / "No *tengo*," the salamander fumed, "*no tengo / nas que dar te*;" and I saw red, red, red, red, red' (164)
S — samples and solders the visuality of sexual attributes and the sound symbolism of sudden death: 'Sharp was her end as the scimitar of Salah-ed-din' (176)
S — swivels the many cities from 'Seville' (122), 'Skagerrak' (138) and 'South Tyrone' (88) 'to San Diego by way of Santa Cruz' (135), to survey in geographical terms the boundless topology of mourning
S — stands for all the spices, substances, plants, vegetables, fruits and flowers that highlight the absence of chilli, that overlap in meaning with each other, with people, politics and poisons, and that introduce to Muldoon's corpus of mourning questions of tact and taste: anconite, anise, arum, cabbage, carrageen, carrots, dandelion, green shoot, hay, hogweed, horehound, jacaranda, jasmine, kale, kief, monk's-hood, nosegay, nutmeg, olive, parsnips, peyote, poppy, ravensara, salt, samphire, satsuma, seaweed, spinach, swede, tonka, vinegar
S — swirls with the solos, sounds, symphonic rock music and voiceless electronics of Beatles, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, 'Jean Michel Jarre's loathsome hocus-pokery' and 'the loathsome Mike Oldfield' (86) and U2 to exemplify Muldoonian sonification and the importance of popular music to his poetry that amplifies in his rock and all poetry suite 'Sleeve Notes' (*H* 29–52); his 'Bob Dylan at Princeton,' November 2000' (*HL* 24); his rock lyrics sung by Warren Zevon and Bruce Sprigsteen, 'Macgillycuddy's Reeks' and 'My Ride's Here;' his elegy for Warren Zevon, 'Sillyhow Stride: *In Memory of Warren Zevon*' (*HL,* 95–107) and his many song lyrics for his readers in general and in his own bands Rackett, Wayside Shrines and Rogue Oliphant: *General Admission, Songs and Sonnets*, *The Word on the Street* and *Saide and the Sadists*.
S — salutes the artists, heroes, writers who vitalise this elegy: Charlemagne, Cicero, Salah-ed-din, Schwitters, Shakespeare, Shane, St John and Zorro to complement the personal eulogy with art from all walks of life

S — solicits the many names of ships and submarines: Caledonia, The Golden Hind, Nautilus, The Pequod, galley and trireme to add a maritime register to Muldoon's botanical, ornithological and neologistic lexicological specialities, and, possibly, to launch a broadside in retaliation to Carey's charges of a poetry 'packed to the gunwales with higher education'[40]
S — sieves suitably into Muldoonian spoofs, skits and shenanigans
S — points to the many directions of South
S — issues a summons to the sordidness and semblances of liberty in Saorstát and the states of America
S — simmers with the seditious spirit of Shan van Vocht, splays out the sacred and secular dualities of Sheela-na-gig, shunts the female vindication in Merriman's *The Midnight Court*, screens the shock of the shifts in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and salutes strong women with similarities to those in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*
S — secures the semiotic methods, surreal imagination and subversive stances of Muldoon's alphabetic cynosure and synaesthetic transtextualities
S — sucks 'the "semen" out of "semantics,"' to cite the antics of '[Carnap]' in *Madoc* ([222])
S — stings with 'the semioticonoclast' (79) of 'Yarrow'
S — splinters stabilities of all kinds: writing and referentiality, life and death, and unsettles assured distinctions
S — searches ceaselessly for its own continuance and ending
S — smarts with all that is not said, not spoken, not written: all that remains inside and outside the letter, 'Yarrow,' *The Annals of Chile*, language, life, death
S —, in 'Yarrow,' results not from an accidental choice of letter. Its transfigurality surpasses concepts of initials, identity, anonymity and referentiality. This semiotic technique probes the processes of language, love, birth, death and mourning as the single letter initiates pluralities of the unknown. The multiple meanings of S — augment the notion of unknowingness in the stern face of death, the emotional flux in its aftermath, and the artistic apprehension of death and grief in language.
S —, on occasions, suggests several different people. Naming belongs to the first acts of mental appropriation (in the biblical sense, family ceremonies, pet names) and cannot avoid the problematics of paronomasia: absence, identifications, alterity. A name frequently serves to call into presence the identity of someone removed in time or space, or someone who might be fictitious or of uncertain origins in the first place. Appellations foster contact and communication; identities are, however often confused in evocations of individuals. If

40 Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' 56.

these confusions of the name to some degree inhere in language, they become pierced by notes of mourning and lamentation. The individual to whom the name appeals is irrevocably absent. The dead recalls to the living other beloved family and friends, and other people who have passed away. Questions remain of how well the mourners actually knew the deceased, their relations in life, and what might have been different. Funeral ceremonies mark the ineluctable end of a person's life on earth, but the name survives the named. In its truncations of ordinary morphology, communication and logic S — exhibits the inadequacies, absurdities and impossibilities in writing and speaking before the dead. Significantly, S — figures its own unspeakability, but also the desperate insistence to pay tribute to the dead, and not be subdued into silence. The single letter signals the will to say something, initiates undefined utterances with no end, and illustrates the disturbances of writing of, to, and in the words of the dead.

Perturbations of presenting the dead inhere in 'Yarrow.' S —, the mother, the father, the other and all the dead in the poem are addressed with a certain frankness and reproach as much as with care and compassion. Transgressions of taste and tact challenge ordinary decorum of ceremony and language, and of standard decency in acts of remembering the dead. Such renunciations of conventional pathos might appear spiteful and vindictive, but they also account for the anger before death, and fortify the relations of love that are now separated by the grave. Conflict and differences are not excluded from love and enduring relationships. Animosity frequently structures the possibilities of love: love remains a fundamental phenomenon of family, friendship and community that retains the capacity to endure, to transform and to outlive enmity and fractiousness. 'Even amidst fierce flames, the expiapiaratory rush / of poppies in July, October poppies' (58), runs a line in the elegy. Encounters with death, the dying and the dead precipitate perplexities of conscience, expiation of religious orthodoxy and psychological trauma that are well known in Irish literature. 'Yarrow' writes a fine line between confession and pride, and between the deep depths of desperation, acts of apostasy and states of listless destitution. The anguished supplication for penitence and delivery runs, among other texts, from the *Book of Psalms*, Augustine's *Confessions* and Wilde's *De Profundis* to the prayers for the dead and funeral rites of the church. In the dream play of the Circe sequence in *Ulysses*, Stephen defends his recusancy against his mother's ghost: 'They say I killed you, mother. He offended your memory. Cancer did it, not I. Destiny.'[41] The evanescence of emotions, memory

41 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1922] 1986), 474.

and words in *Krapp's Last Tape*, includes the musings on 'viduity' and the recollections of withdrawing from the mother's death bed. 'Yarrow' constitutes a secular catalogue of the dead that resists *apriorities* of religious condemnation and piety. Similarly, the uproarious language and abrasive attitude frequently upset conventional ceremony and commemoration. Linguistic calcification, formal petrifaction and traditional memorilisation confine the singularity of the dead and the mourner, and the welter of uncontainable emotions within set forms and the inerasableness of the said. One of this poem's many memorable qualities lies in its incessant quest for words, forms, references and sounds that might grasp some fragments of the death and devastation that established language and previous poetics fail to articulate.

Lest we forget. Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* are only two reminders from world literature that enact how speaking before death and the dead can hardly ever be extrapolated from a public and political context. In Ireland and Northern Ireland rites of the dead do not merely appear in an already defined political and social context; they also serve to exercise powers that change these contexts. Eibhlin Dubh O' Connel's 'Lament for Art O'Leary,' Robert Emmet's speech from the dock, Patrick Pearse's oration at O'Donovan Rossa's graveside in 1915, Yeats's 'Easter 1916,' Gerry Adams's tribute to Bobby Sands, Michael Stone's attack on the mourners of the Gibraltar victims in the Milltown Cemetery and in the M C the police surveillance of paramilitary funeral parades, Remembrance Day and all the annals of the Troubles victims in books, journals, magazines and newspapers amply demonstrate that words spoken at the graveside or written tributes to the dead are often explosive in an Irish context. Remembrance frequently instigates conflict, not conciliation. Cortèges and cemeteries are arenas of contention and violent confrontation. 'Yarrow' incorporates the troubled heritage of commemorative ceremony in a divided community in the mother's account of the United Irishmen, constitutional politicians and revolutionary rebels in the Republican tradition:

> the legacy of Arthur Griffin'
> (she meant Griff*ith*) 'and Emmet and Wolfe Tone
> is lost, completely lost
>
> on our loanin'-end ideologues,
> while the legacy of Connolly and, God help us, Pearse
> is the latest pell-mell in Pall Mall.' (165)

'Yarrow' crosses into the complex politics of mourning, but dwells more on the private than the public dimension. The historical conflict and political situation

of Northern Ireland appear steadfastly in Muldoon's poetry, but the elegies in *The Annals of Chile* tend to be overburdened by personal matters. Artistic attention to subjects that cannot respond – *The Annals of Chile* – raises questions of taste, tact and responsibility; the many indelicacies of 'Yarrow' heighten these considerations. Questions of exploitation surround these elegies, as they do the Catch 22 of embracing or eschewing the troubles of life and death in the poetics of Northern/Ireland. Language is always defiled, impure and contaminated and recourse to language cannot spare its subjects such imperfections. No subject is ever pristine and pure. 'Yarrow' does not conceal these unavoidable disenchantments.

In its rare, possibly singular, poetic contrivance, the novelty of S —, in its uncontrollability and vitality, memorably serves to mark the deaths commemorated in these annals. If death precipitates a state of change and shock in which the deceased and the mourner are no longer themselves, 'Yarrow' registers such ineffable, ultimate, terminal inevitability by altering the very media in which such deprivation is registered: language, elegies, eulogies. 'Yarrow' ends on notes of irretrievability and placelessness:

> that I've either forgotten or disavowed;
> it has to do with a trireme, laden with ravensara,
> that was lost with all hands between Ireland and Montevideo. (189)

The many geo-temporal circuits of memory and mourning, from life in Armagh to the designation of South America promised by the collection's title, disappear at an unspecified time and place. Memories of Muldoon's mother, the stride and slips of S —, all the multifarious commemorations have already sunk without trace. The sunken ship becomes symbolic of the poem's hidden meanings and the impossibility of arriving at a safe harbor for which it searches emotionally and poetically. The accumulations of the cycle's chimes in the final envoi refer the poem's ending back to the many preceding sounds and circles. This failure of arrival, the sunken ship and the linguistic recircularity, tends to deny recovery and finality: sorrow remains continuously. 'Yarrow' enacts in its overflowing language the loss and bereavement of Brigid Muldoon, and of lost family and friends in both bio- and bibliographical terms. The poem also refuses to participate in recriminatory condemnation or redemption before the dead, and conceptualises in riveted language a life of living with death and the dead.

The Annals of Chile makes use of novel language to write anew the profound moments in human existence: birth, death, art. Such existence- and life-altering events instigate emotions of and meditations upon felicity, fatality and

transformation, and the challenge, particularly to writers, of how these phenomena might be articulated in written form. Muldoon's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the first poem introduces these themes that appear from A to Z in this volume. All of the poems contain in their creative and coded language some aspects of the mysteries of language, of cradle and of crypt. Vitalogues – 'The Sonogram,' The Footling,' The Birth' – and narrathanotografies – 'Milkweed and Monarch,' 'Incantata,' 'Yarrow' – form a syzygy of vitality and mortality in the volume. Mysticism in these poems does not indulge in metaphysical speculations upon the fates beyond earthly existence, as the volume focuses on the apprehensions of miracles of birth and sorrows of death among the living. Alphabetic dis-solutions and formal organisation attempt to conceptualise anew the mysteries of life and death for the living, and to mark their subjects with individuality and singularity. Muldoon's birth poems might be some of the first celebrations by a man of a daughter's coming into being and their alphabetic energies, neologistic generation, sonogrammatic scanning and sonnetic development grapple with the inexplicability of the event, and the desire to register her uniqueness in language and form. Muldoon's mourning of death becomes extremely memorable for its intellectual acknowledgement and linguistic enactment of forgetting. The elegiac imperative to remember records incessantly the transformations of language, of fugitive memory and of corrosion of time. Life and death in these poems function not only as personal events that merit poetic scrutiny, they also figure the inscrutable processes of language and poetry: linguistic engendering and atrophy, poetic procreativity and canonical decomposition. Celebrations of birth exude affirmative powers in The Annals of Chile, as do the elegies in their sangfroid stoicism and their exhibition of the many alternatives – sacrifice, suicide, solipsism – that enlarge and encroach upon the choices of life. *The Annals of Chile* marks a publication in Muldoon's oeuvre, and in the canon of commemoration, in which generative alphabetisation and formal renewal pay tribute to the newborn and the deceased of his own family. The volume remains cryptic in its exposure of how these phenomena – birth, death, art – do not have a core of essence that can be accessed with determination and finality. Moreover, a linguistic medium that is always indeterminate and relational affords no stable definitions of the mysteries of human origins and life-span, or the vestiges of their presence, for those who mourn a loved one. *The Annals of Chile* discloses the surreptitious comforts of conventional communication and traditional rites before the incomprehensible conditions of existence, and it maintains and insists upont the mysteriousness of language, nativity and mortality by denying explanation and solutions. The consolation to the writer, the reader

and the bereaved remains in Muldoon's successful attempts to articulate again the frequently unspeakable joys and unutterable sorrows in a language that offers as much refraction and restraint as completion and reference. Events of quotidian life and radically darkened thematic concerns are defamilirised and rendered in deconstructive language.

CHAPTER 8

Hay

'Well. I say, to discover through language some little revision, however slight. That is to say, literally, some new way of looking at the world, a new way of looking at this lamp or this table or whatever. In some sense to change, to be changed,' Muldoon responds to Lucy Smith's question: 'What for you might be the main aim or function of writing?'[1] In *Hay*, his eighth volume of poetry published in 1998, Muldoon continues to explore in his poetry how language works and fails. His response to Smith echoes Shklovsky's ideas of defamiliarisation, but contains few elements of Adorno's radically darkened art, and of Derridean monstrosity. It also tends to illustrate the coherent down-scaling of linguistic ambition in his poetry in the wake of *Madoc*. Yet he still prioritises the transformative possibilities of language. His example, 'the lamp,' indicates the shift that many critics note in *Hay*, from rebellious attitudes, engagement with the Troubles and the grand questions of birth and death towards contentment, domesticity and the smaller things in life.[2] His sustained interest in a 'new way of looking at the world' extends to his formal experimentation too. Muldoon raids most forms of poetry with a bent for adding novelty to tradition. Approximately two thirds of his poems can be characterised as sonnets; they all have novel elements, hardly any two look the same. In *The Annals of Chile* he also renews villanelles, elegies and sestinas. He splits and splices in many cases recognisable forms into new alterrratives, italicettes, narrathanotographies. *Hay* extends the Muldonic repertoire of formal renovation to Persian ghazal, Malayan pantoum and Japanese Haiku, normally with his own touch of idiosyncrasy, while at the same time continuing his old transformative energies. 'I've tried never to do the same thing twice; I just want to do something different,' as he claims in an interview with *The Observer*.[3] Muldoon's embrace and his forging of the new, his formal metamorphoses and his endless submersion in language flow onward from *The Annals of Chile* to *Hay*. Links of language are tight and numerous. Muldoon's dissection of words, his

1 Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' 80.

2 Most critics take their cue from Muldoon's settled and somewhat secluded family situation and age, and pay attention to themes of domesticity and middle age. Many critics regarded *Hay* as a transitional volume, an attention to domesticity and mid-life that promised a lot of potential for the future. David Wheatley concludes: '*Hay* is far from the end of the story.' 'An Irish Poet in America,' *Raritan* 18, no. 4 (Spring) (1999), 157.

3 AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *The Observer*, 15 November 1998, 14.

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mining of dictionaries and his incorporation of other languages and diverse registers prove persistent in his 1998 volume too. The volume contains constant reminders that language in Muldoon's poetry is not merely a medium; rather, it creates new conceptions of birth, death and everyday objects, such as lamps, and it excels in analogous functions. 'Life is indeed no more than "a misprint / in the sentence of death"' (23), runs the terse termination of the narrathanographic 'Now, Now,' in which a loving couple envisions a 'squint / into the glint / of a firing party,' in a poem that faces, again, up to death in sartorial terminology synchronised in Muldoon's artistry to the sounds and silence of an execution peloton. Via linguistic self-referencing, this end verse also draws attention to the longer grammatical units that stretch beyond letter and lexicon in this volume. How to turn the line is a perennial challenge for poets. How to start, stretch and stop the sentence and the stanza seems to be an additional concern in this volume. Conversely, the recording of life assumes a number of alterratives, not least the final long finish 'The Bangle (Slight Return),' but also the initial 'The Mud Room' and the portraits of the poet as a middle-aged man in 'Sleeve Notes' and 'Hopewell Haiku' which present Muldonic alterratives. Sonic resemblances, formal features and intra- and intertextual integration also bridge the two volumes. A quartet of titles, 'Errata,' 'The Plot,' 'The Point' and 'Rune,' draw conspicuous attention to Muldoon's perennial probing of language, literature, narration and interpretation, but perhaps the most memorable poems in the volume are those in which his alphabetics and artifice combine less noticeably to examine the human condition: terror, death and afterlife in 'Aftermath' and 'Wire;' mature love in 'The Long Finish' and 'The Train;' family life in 'The Mud Room;' memories of his father / the father figure and possibilities of unbirth in 'Third Epistle to Timothy' and 'The Bangle (Slight Return);' commemoration of art and artist in 'The Hug,' his elegy for fellow writer Joseph Brodsky; and the complexities of the rural in the lyrical 'Hay.' *Hay*, the volume title, in each and every way, develops directly from the multi semantic and irreconcilable 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile*. Almost imperceptible rhymes and combinations of sound patterns spread across the two books. Muldoon retains his 'untrammelled, energetic engagement with language,' but whereas in previous collections he tended 'to let it have its way with you, as it were,' he now seems much more to have his way with language.[4]

A surprisingly high number of critics comment upon aspects of Muldoon's language in their reviews of *Hay*. They range from anger and confusion to astuteness and clarity. William Pratt asks in annoyance and in tones of puzzlement and resentment: 'Who is he, this Irish-born writer with his multilingual

4 Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 27.

banter, this Euramerican expatriate with the gift of the gab, this erudite jester with a nose for the news? A talented teaser who passes for a profound poet, that's who.'[5] An anonymous reviewer observes the long line and the indelible impact it lends to the volume: 'Perhaps the reader is more shocked than moved, made to feel breathless, dizzy by the propulsion and pace of Muldoon's line: neon, blinking, busy, cut out of language with pinking shears, as if to say, as he ends one poem in the idiom of the moment: "Go figure."'[6] David Wheatley describes in his finely attuned analysis the language of *Yarrow* and *Hay* as 'baroque, frequently bilingual (S — talks in Gaelic), self-referential but also, in its unprecedented way, exhilarating. Some training in its exotic dialect greatly improve one's chances of understanding a word of what is going on in *Hay*.'[7] Andrew Fisardi records Muldoon's 'unpredictableness, verbal panache, and downright maniacal gusto' and 'his wickedly witty verbal invention and high-spirited lampooning of everything, including himself,' and reviews *Hay* as 'a wild tour de force of verbal legerdemain and weird juxtaposition.'[8] In his revelatory review of how Muldoon's poetry relates to the larger discourses of nationalist ideology, identitarian politics, experimental language and the arts of literature, Nicholas Jenkins concludes:

> Could there be a more urgent task for a poet in an age of literary and political nationalisms? *Hay* memorably demonstrates that it is not the tightly woven fabric of an idealized textual or social order that creates meaning. Instead, it is the anomalous connecting 'rhymes' and fertile instabilities in language that generate poetry. This, too, is Joycean in spirit as well as in letter. As the poem 'Errata' slyly insists: 'For "loom" read bloom.'[9]

Mick Imlah is another reviewer who sees the wider dimensions of Muldoon's protean language:

> Yet Muldoon's technical resources – his formal imagination, range of allusion, lexical abundance and rhyming panache – have only expanded with the years, and the wit that deploys them is sharper than ever ... He may be said to have reinvented the possibilities of rhyme for our time;

5 William Pratt, 'Review of *Hay*,' *World Literature Today* 73, no. 2 (Spring) (1999), 338.
6 AA, 'Review of *Hay*,' *Virginia Quarterly Review* 75, no. 2 (1999), 65.
7 Wheatley, 'An Irish Poet in America,' 147.
8 Andrew Frisardi, 'Review of *Hay*,' *The Boston Globe*, 27 December 1998, L2.
9 Nicholas Jenkins, 'For "Mother" Read "Other,"' *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1999, 10.

> and the way his words slip in and out of each other, marrying, transforming or dissolving, carries a constant metaphysical charge.[10]

Many critics have included the odd throwaway comment on Muldoon's ear-smacking and eye-stabbing language from the very outset of his publications. By this point in his development his ever-evolving forages into the realms of language have become the distinctive, inescapable and smartingly goading quality of his poetry for almost all critics. Gradually, Muldoon has established his own way with words as an inevitable criterion for evaluating his own poetry. Jenkins' conclusion on the correspondence between Muldoon and Joyce is correct. The reference, 'bloom,' to Joyce's *Ulysses* indicates parallels of artistic, linguistic, historical and socio-political perspectives between the two. Just as Joyce challenged aesthetic paradigms, the Celtic Renaissance and the political hegemony of his own time and thus presented a new and imaginative template for envisioning the future in *Ulysses* at the very dawning of the Irish Republic in 1922, Muldoon's writing questions many of the reigning ideas of contemporary poetry, the schisms of war and conflict in Northern Ireland and the doctrines of political rhetoric and institutional orthodoxy of many kinds in a provocative poetry that pries open some new possibilities for the future at a time of cease-fires, peace talks and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Bloomian reference also incorporates indirectly 'The Dead' and reminds us of its prominence in his critical thinking and in his writing, for example in *To Ireland, I* and his elegies, and the importance of Joyce's language galaxy, most prominent in *Finnegnas Wake* of course, to his own poetic space, not least *Madoc*. Yet Yeats looms as large in Muldoon's poetry as Joyce.[11] Heaney and MacNeice and the Belfast Group and the whole canon of Western poetry also belong to Muldoon's

10 Mick Imlah, 'Rhymes for Our Times,' *The Observer*, 15 November 1998, 14.

11 A consensus appears to have operated until the 1990s in dividing contemporary Northern Irish poetry into the continuities of either Joyce or Yeats. See, for example, Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, Irish Studies (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Maurice Harmon, ed. *Irish Poetry after Yeats* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1979); Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). The allocation of Muldoon's ancestry to the shrines of either Yeats or Joyce fits poorly his poetry, as his poetry and critical essays clearly evince. Although Muldoon has learnt much of his trade form his two great Irish predecessors, he draws upon numerous other poets, as his poetry and critical essays also evince. Joyce's writing governs *To Ireland, I.* Muldoon's *The End of the Poem* offers essays on seventeen poets from Yeats to Heaney. See also, Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation*.

home ground. Not to mention his own poetry. Consequently, the exchange of 'loom' for 'bloom' in 'Errata' that Jenkins draws attention to, is much more likely to supplement the looming presence of Joyce with a Bloomian anxiety of influence.[12]

Imlah enlarges the hermeneutic horizons of Muldoon's inscrutable ways with language beyond Jenkins' socio-political reference points to a 'constant metaphysical charge.' Undoubtedly, Muldoon's language, which is always hard to define and always on the margins of the established due to his energetic creativity and unswerving fascination with 'the word', engages with the deeper concerns of the human condition. How language refers to the concrete and the factual is small talk compared to how it grapples with political appropriation of apparently neutral discourse, with human emotions and abstract cognition, with imagining the unknown, the other and the unrealised, and with how we understand our own place in a world and a universe that are so large and inclement and apparently incommunicative.

Hay, in title, title poem and meaning, serves many purposes in Muldoon's eighth volume of poetry. The harvesting of hay signals naturally the cycles of life, death and renewal as much as hard work, saving and survival. Hay is essential for wintering out. Holdridge points to a more Muldonic association: 'the idea of hay as a natural material, shaped and packed for cultural consumption.'[13] Muldoon always gives preference to the manmade over the organic. Hay also indicates the many sounds, synonyms, ideas and associations that spread from 'Virgil's *Georgics*' in the opening poem, 'The Mud Room' (5), to Virgil's part in the final alterrative 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' and to many poems in between, for example 'The Plot' (16), 'Tract' (16), 'Green Gown' (22), 'Hay' (52), 'Apple Slump' (53), 'Hopewell Haiku' (56–73), 'Long Finish' (78–81), 'Horses' (90), 'Aftermath' (93), 'Wire' (94) and 'Third Epistle to Timothy' (97–103). Probably most poems in this collection have their roots in or can be grafted on to the title in one Muldoonish way or other. Virgil, of *The Aeneid* as much as *The Eclogues* and *The Georgics*, provides the classical backdrop for these poems. 'The ghost of Marvell is everywhere in this book,' argues Clair Wills.[14] So is the spirit of Seamus Heaney and 'Hay' finds one of its interesting frames of interpretation as a response to the 1995 poet laureate's 'Digging.' Correspondences with Frost are many and Muldoon's *Hay* can certainly be regarded as a man-handled version of Whitmanesque leaves of grass. *Hay* ensues from 'Yarrow,' and, as the plant in the previous volume also referred to

12 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*.
13 Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon*, 142.
14 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 203.

rivers, this title refers to Hay in Canada and Hay in Australia. Joycean rivers of linguistic fluency, lexical rivulets, sonic swirls and semantic whirlpools run through Muldoon's poetry, especially in *Madoc*, *The Annals of Chile* and *Hay*. And hey, hay certainly plays with ooze and romp and a roll in the hay and the many plots, puns and play of hay reach their apogee in 'The Plot.' 'The Plot,' perhaps the quintessential Muldoonesque language poem, is hardly ever mentioned by critics, and given very short shrift when it is discussed.

The Plot

He said, my pretty dear maid, if it is as you say,
I'll do my best endeavours in cutting of your hay,
For in your lovely countenance I never saw a frown,
So my lovely lass, I'll cut your grass, that's ne'er been trampled down.

Traditional ballad

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a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l
f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f
a l f a                       a l f a
l f a l                       l f a l
f a l f                       f a l f
a l f a       a l p h a       a l f a
l f a l                       l f a l
f a l f                       f a l f
a l f a                       a l f a
l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l
f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f
a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
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'The Plot' offers a very concrete example of Muldoon's alphabetic polysemantics in *Hay*. As with any other example, 'The Plot' illustrates the very problematics of representation that also comprehend the movements and hermeneutics of Muldoon's writing. An example normally proposes that a singular aspect or artifact can represent generic characteristics, or that it can function as a precedent model or parallel case. These Platonic propositions are hardly tenable and present example as an abstract concept unmediated by language. In a metonymic use of the example, it is certainly ex-ample; it excepts most of the ampleness from which it supposedly derives, thus making an example of inevitable reductive procedures that is not advisable. As a parallel or similar

case, the concept of exemplarity is paradoxical in its dependence upon sameness and differentiation. If a total, metaphoric shift took place, all difference would be elided and the example would only illustrate itself and annul its own logic. In all cases, the traditional logic of the example is solicited. Example contains within itself an abbreviated form of itself, f. ex., a *mise en langue* that reduplicates the processes of exemplarity. The initial letters of the word come to form, by invagination, an internal part that is larger than the whole, and the consequences of this division and overflowing remain as singular as they are limitless. As a separate unit within the entity, the same beginning, ex, also presupposes and prefixes the word with outdatedness/superannuation and erasure: the word has been exed and axed from the very beginning. Its amplitudes already belong to the past and the former abundance is no longer part of the word's proprieties. Simultaneously, the initial letters except themselves from the totality to suggest exchange within the economy of language and logic in general, and exclusion from fullness. The very moment the word example launches itself, it already reduces, outdates, distances and differentiates. It expropriates itself, excommunicates, and is no longer sufficient to represent unproblematically without calling into question its own capacities as a signifier. This autocritique of exemplarity is exemplarily inscribed in the word as it also contains an abbreviated form of assessment that connotes academic evaluation and critical introspection: exam. These exergonic remarks upon example intersect with the following examination of 'The Plot.' The plots and play in *Hay* are given a concrete example in 'The Plot,' a poem that also absorbs the volume's narrative field.

'The text never in fact begins,' states Derrida in his advocacy of an *archewriting* that has been infinitely preceded by rifts and ruptures.[15] Despite this vertiginous textuality, the emergency arises for an apprehension of the semiotic swirl in the senses of demarcation and singularity, the strenuous work to define and distinguish texts a cut above the rest: 'If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge.'[16] Within Derrida and Muldoon's practices, such textual edges often detach violently the text from notions of origin – whether historical, biographical, psychoanalytic or didactic – particularly in a commonplace political or moral sense. In their aesthetics, such texts also operate incisively within the corpus of unity and ossified structures of narration and reference. Of the textual problems of words, meaning and social significance, letters

15 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Brabara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1972] 1993), 333.

16 'Living On: Border Lines,' in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom and et al. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 83.

place themselves first and foremost. 'I will speak, therefore, of a letter,' Derrida admits in one of his many essays on the movements of writing and reason, and he continues only to start again:

> I will speak, therefore, of the letter *a*, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there, into the writing of the word *difference*; and to do so in the course of a writing on writing, and also a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points, intersecting with a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly.[17]

To keep writing 'seemly' is never Derrida's main concern; neither is it Muldoon's. 'The point of poetry is to be acutely discomforting, to prod and provoke, to poke us in the eye, to punch us in the nose, to knock us off our feet, to take our breath away,' he says.[18] Alphabetic allusions and alphalogical artifice frequently acquire unacknowledged significance in their activation of single letters and implosion of larger structures, lexicon, syntax, grammar, reference. Alfalfa in 'The Plot' aligns, and possibly ironises, Derridean *différance*, as much as this type of poetics inheres in the contemporary discourses in humanities. As *Madoc* might be read as a parapostmodernist paradigm, the alphabetic square in 'The Plot' alludes to, and possibly marks the limits of the template of letters and translations that have marked the writing in Northern Ireland from Derek Mahon's poem 'The Window' and Brian Friel's *Translations* to Ciaran Carson's 'Letters from the Alphabet' and *Opera Et Cetera*.[19] Apart from limiting this letter method in Muldoon, of course, who keeps the alphabetic template running in various ways in *To Ireland, I*, 'The Little Black Book' (86), 'A Half-Door near Cluny' (103), 'Horse Latitudes' (*HL*, 3–21), 'Plan B' (*Mag*, 3–21) and '@' (*Mag*, 74). Certainly, ludic alphabetics, agricultural allusions, conceptual disunities and formal design in 'The Plot' offer a compact interaction with 'Alphabets' and the many frontiers of writing, the chthonic elements and organicist poetics, the many acts of union, and the 'Squarings' of Heaney's aesthetics in the ever-evolving intertextual dialogue between the two poets.

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17 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, [1972] 1982), 3.

18 James Fenton, 'A Poke in the Eye with a Poem,' *The Guardian*, 21 October 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview6, accessed 17 April 2019.

19 Derek Mahon, *The Snow Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 25. Friel, *Translations*; Ciaran Carson, *Opera Et Cetera* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1996).

In Plato's *Republic*, poetry is two stages removed from reality and truth and in his treatise on drama, *Poetics*, Aristotle designates language with melody and spectacle as the third constituent element in tragedy after plot and character. Tertiary to reality and truth, to plot and character, language appears as an appendage or aftermath in Greek philosophy and tragedy, whereas histrionics is only one of several components in the linguistic hubris of contemporary poetics.[20] Muldoonian staging of textuality subscribes as much to Aristophanes's ideas of drama and Callimachus's ideas of poetry as they do to the poetics of Aristotle. The plots and play in Muldoonian poetry also excel in all the linguistic and literary techniques that the enlightenment thinker Joseph Addison condemned as 'false wit.'[21] Apropos the characters and the 'eareye seeshears' of the 'verbivocovisual' of Muldoon's plot, his ordeal also appears as ambivalent assonance and alphabetic construction of Joycean ordinance from *Finnegans Wake,* the text Ihab Hassan terms the 'monstrous prophecy for our postmodernity.'[22]

The plotting of the poem's polysemous title points to some of these movements in its meanings of agricultural cultivation, narrative structures, intertextual intrigues and political machinations. The hay of 'The Plot' also overlaps with the plot of the volume's hay. Hay plays on the possibilities of raking in on a text that risks making a muddle of meanings, or going to bed with too many partners in its hard labour, or hey, was it just a festive *faux pas*, to cut away some old grass of Parnassus. Hay alludes to the linguistic instability and the multidirectional orientations of the volume, as it also names two rivers at the opposite ends of the world, in Canada and Australia. In 'The Plot,' the fluidity of organicist poetics and the growth of *Finnegans Wake* are combined in an example of concrete poetry. 'The Plot' also brings forth a haybox of Derridean writing.

The first stanza's tale of seduction depicts the lie of the Romantic land, and redoubles the contours of organicist poetics and Romantic tenets. It appears as

20 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [380 B.C.] 1993), 70–114 and 344–362; Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [335 B.C.] 1982), 50–52; Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*. The 'linguistic turn' of the twentieth century, so named after Rorty's collection of essays, from de Sausurre's semiotics, Wittgenstein's language games, Austin's performativity, Jakobson's structuralist linguistics and Searle's speech acts to Derrida's writing, and the vertiginous inversions of this linguistic turn in all types of writing and fields of art, is well known.

21 Joseph Addison, 'True and False Wit,' in *The Spectator*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent, [1711] 1945), 189–194.

22 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, [1939] 1975), 341; Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), xiii.

the end of an implicit narrative on natural beauty and love rendered in the common language of ordinary people. Balladic form ensures the popular address of an elevation of the natural in the mode of Rouseau's vision of natural innocence; be it of rustic life, spoken language or amorous emotions. At first sight and sound, the excerpt creates a distinctive counterpoint to the succeeding scientific matrix, a division that hints of Romantic ballad versus concrete poetry, and artistic afflatus versus cerebral analysis, but these good intellectual fences (that make good textual neighbours) constitute an audiovisual mirage.

Deception is a significant part of many plots, and absolutely so in the 'traditional ballad' form that frames this particular plot. The generic label attached to the first stanza generally conceals the complexities of the clod. In its textual intricacies, a ballad frequently appears in various versions without a definite original. Several alternatives resemble and imitate each other and multifarious textual fabrications make its roots untraceable. This text is rooted in such features. As a copy of copies with no original, this Muldoonian ballad exemplifies the dépêche mode of the simulacrum.

If unknown origin is one of the criteria of a traditional ballad, this does not exclude a mischievous Muldoon as the author. The onomastic precariousness of the truncated ballad places the covenant between author, text and reader somewhere between romantic rainbows' gravity, Thomas Pynchon's *V* and Barthes' essay of lethal authority, 'The Death of the Author.' Numerous aspects of the anonymous ballad pinpoint a postmodernist poet much more aligned to the possibilities Foucault cultivates in 'What is an author?' in the vacuum of Barthes' homicide. Perhaps this possibility is first adumbrated by an imperceptibly rawer nerve in the cutting of the fertile crops. Certainly, it is revealed in the self-conscious play on a roll in the hay and fields of 'endeavours' that suggests an American English adlinguisticity that appears anachronistic to Romantic sensibility. The trisyllabic 'endeavours' also suggests some air of idiomatic currency, for example of a sales representative, that breaks the Romantic air. 'Countenance' strikes similar notes. Nevertheless, these verses are not a pastiche nor a French Lieutenant's Woman in the rank and file of Hiberno- or Anglo-American narrative order. Confusions of the archaic and the authentic flow in Romanticism at least since Chatterton's pseudo-archaic prose and fake documents and Macpherson's famous Ossian forgeries. Henry Mackenzie's and Thomas Warton's unmasking of these two textual producers did not reduce their immense popularity and influence on the Romantic imagination. Sir Walter Scott's reduplication of Scots minstrelsy also promoted pastoral pastiche as part of the genre *per se*. Forgeries and pastiche grow in the soil of folk lore and Muldoon's air is no less adulterous than other seductive lays. To the

extent that Muldoon's tralatitious ballad becomes a pasticcio of a type of poetry to which pastiche and perjury were always already partial, it is the hyperconscious linguisticism – the love à la mode – that re-marks Muldoon's postmodernist tract.

The position and nature of the second stanza reinforce these hermeneutic suspicions. The calculated juxtaposition of an organicist ballad with a concrete poem as two stanzas in the same poem delineates schismatic divisions to such an extent that it almost constructs a parodic paradigm of binary distinctions. The architectonics of the first stanza as a fallen one and the latter as a square zero revisualises the binary digits of dichotomisation. The second stanza blocks out the edges of the text with all the power of a piston in a ludic visualisation of the complex choices of language and composition. This mechanical superimposition of closure illustrates how the infinite play of signifiers has to be stopped at some point in order to delimit the production of multiple meanings. Nevertheless, the text of the closed stanza contains no stops and the impossibility of numbers defies the poetic practice of syntactical composition and metric scansion. The alembic's zerometre and the reiteration of a l f a l f a l f al f a l f a l f a surrender the points of fixity to relativity. In this letterbox, the individual letters assume specificity in dependence on different semiotic structures.

a starts signifiance

a and 'The Plot' accentuate an aphonic and accessible example of Muldoonian aesthetics

a and 'The Plot' acknowledge and deconstruct the hegemonic system of binarism, still in action inside and outside of Northern-Ireland

a and 'The Plot' appositely oppose Addison's admonitions of the false wit of single letters and concrete poetry, just as the fifty homonymic hands that Muldoon handles deftly in 'They that Wash on Thursday' in *Hay* and 'As' and 'On' in *Moy Sand and Gravel* exploit the single word that Addison refutes, just as 'Capercailles' in *Madoc* avers the acrostics that Addison antagonises, just as Muldoon's anti-dogmatic 'A Collegelands Catechism' in *Moy Sand and Gravel* plays on the doggerels that Addison denigrates, just as Muldoonia extols the puns, quibbles, mimicry that Addison excludes: in Muldoon's mixed wit the assemblage and casuistry of letters and words complicate the resemblance and congruity of ideas

a appears as a self-linguistic simile pairing down a Blakean vision to see an acre in a whirl of sign, a vowel that enfolds the acre of which it is a part

a precipitates an inflexible chain of significant arbitration and arbitrary signification and arrives at swift and sterne writing and Muldoonian admixture of absurdities and aperçu

a marks the text with indecision as the indefinite article that introduces the poem from the inside, reappears intermittently and closes the many lines, signals the atomic values and relativity of this letter chain reaction
a marks the definite article in the Hungarian language if succeeded by a consonant, for example b
a signals an answer to a preceding text, to the traditional ballad that forms the first stanza, to Muldoon's oeuvre, to contemporary poetry, to writing that was always already there
a addresses Heaney's 'Alphabets' and Carson's 'Letters from the Alphabet'
a is inscribed within grading schemes and used as a category in censorship, humorously suggesting that the poem could be the first choice from the best poet in class, a poem that is certified (in Britain) for all ages, but requires professional guidance for A-levels and undergraduates
a accentuates the first letter of numerous alphabets, A1 so to write, or initialises an Alfa Romeo on the textual autostradas of the Renaissance, or drives in first-class conditions in a format that expands the standards of folio. This alphabetic route goes from a to a, from one place to the same place, from beginning to beginning, from end to end, and it includes far from everything
a arbitrates a demarcation of the trial drives of writing and closure by leaving the many lines with a new beginning to come yet again, for example in 'Hard Drive' in *Moy Sand and Gravel*, or the narrative circularity of 'Immram' in *Why Brownlee Left* and 'Gallogly, or Gollogly, otherwise known as Ingoldsby, otherwise known as English' in the quest for id-entity in 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' in *Quoof*
a shapes an alpharama that starts with its ending, ends with its beginning and inserts various beginnings and ends in its middle as an incipient circle that never departs from an end that cannot be apprehended
a visualises the Norwegian å without a circle, as half the aa
a represents one third of the universal vowels
aha, a, the epenthesis of all alphabetic letters in English articulation
a, i.e. an IE vowel and the h-dropped 'ay in many regions, eh?
a attracts attention to the singular details of the text as if to adumbrate the internal reference method deployed in the final text, 'The Bangle (Slight Return),' which is clearly designed, by accident or accuracy, to affront and derange approved reference systems, for example the MLA Handbook or the Chicago Manual, as an academic in-joke
a associates with the sign, signature and signifiance of S— in 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile* to form a symbiotic aS— that names 'As' in *Moy Sand and Gravel* and draws together the alphalogics and the sexuality of Muldoon's textuality

a tends to be the prime choice for abstract terms in algebraic equations of unknown factors
a prefixes and suffixes an agent of oxidation to the linguistic elements, for example alumina, annealing the edges of the poem and refining the text into a corundum. Ala and alfa, the linguistic gem radiates with approximate aza-compounds, molecular structures consisting of different atoms; this multivalent unit consists of different irreducible letters that circulate their own core but risk connecting with others at any time
a computes an attogram, measuring in the scales of Scandinavian atten, eighteen, the preceding eighteen letters in the line, the one million million millionth, 10^{18}, of natural superabundance and infinite iteration of letters
a prepositions respect for each and every succeeding value throughout
a encircles its own emptiness like an inverted single-spaced capital B, but also opens up like a c.
a mirrors within itself the stanza's voluminous spacing, a ventilatory distribution of letters that tempers with the delineation of text, as the empty outside also appears within the text and vice versa. As the many margins inform the text, they unite and separate the alphabetic railing from its exteriority and interiority, and the posts from themselves and the many modernist isms and wasms
a records the first of sides, A and B on an LP, as the diapason in a tonic sol-fa in this poetry volume, *Hay*, that amplifies the great classic albums of rock in 'Sleeve Notes,' and in this play of letters a and l, and in the plot of grass, can be singled out the name of Al Green, the son of a sharecropper and the great crooner of ballads and soul who still stands by the tradition of mellifluous romance that has been almost mown down by rebellious rock' n roll
a represents atonally the sixth note of a C-major scale and is no more melodious than the knowledge of sugar is sweet. The cardinal vowel 5 ex-amplifies the most sonorous speech sound and the concert pitch of the rock and all in the well-conducted 'Sleeve Notes,' and the 440 Hz set swinging the many double and broken reeds of the old sod, 'The Little Black Book' and 'Errata' that appear in *Hay,* and the rap given to uncritical sentimentalism for the past and the place in 'The Old Country' in *Horse Latitudes*
[a] actually equals <r>, you hear
a is not the, you see, plurifications of the indefinite oppose the putative singularity of the definite article
a enacts within this singular text aporetics of affirmation, denial, condition and absence. A predicates adjective and adverb, a indicates a delayed affirmation of a preceding subject's own mode and manner that the adverbial and adjectival prefix, a, indicates that the modifier does not have. Per se, a prefixes

within the poem a very apoetic poem, a poem that annuls predicated characteristics in the process of disclosing themselves
a can be associated with Muldoon's alacrity for adversity that ranges from the electro-Edenic exodus of 'The Electric Orchard' in *New Weather* to the complex arrangements of Irish-American-Jewish-Arabic cultures and clashes in *Moy Sand and Gravel*
a, a l, a l f, a l f a, a l f a l, a l f a l f a á la written alalia @ first site, impugns instrumental logocentric procedures in its implosion of lexico-semantic hermeneutics. A fission into power morphemics intensifies academic prolusion and creates new valences of discourse
a arrays alphas with no omega
a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a

A is nevertheless far from enough. The play continues. The plot of the trad ballad appears square. Conversely, the semiotic square has no plot. Still, the second stanza swirls with the Alph, the sacred river by Kubla Kahn's pleasure dome in Xanadu in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan.' The first stanza of 'The Plot' really grooves with the oomph and ooze and cunning linguistics of Burns' racy colleen in 'My Girl She's Airy,' the lines in the Scottish bard's first *Commonplace Book* from September 1784, not the expurgated version of later publications:

> My Girl she's airy, she's buxom and gay
> Her breath is as sweet as the blossoms in May;
> A touch of her lips it ravishes quite
> She's always good natur'd, good humor'd and free
> She dances, she glances, she smiles with a glee;
> Her eyes are the lightenings of joy and delight;
> Her slender neck, her handsome waist,
> Her hair well buckl'd, her stays well lac'd,
> Her taper white leg, with an et and a c.
> For her a, b, c, d, and her c, u, n, t,
> And Oh, for the joys of a long winter night.[23]

'a l p h a,' the central subplot in the second stanza of Muldoon's ploy on letters and narrativity, distributes a phonetic acronym of the many plants in the plots of *Hay*: alfalfa, lucerne, pot, hay, arbutus, cat's-tail, citronella, clover, corn, cowslip, darnel, fescue, grass, may, rush, thistle, timothy. Synonyms cut short the idea of synonyms: If you use other words you say different things. The

23 AA, 'Burns Country,' in *The Burns Encyclopedia*, http://www.robertburns.org/, accessed 17 April 2019.

acrostic appears as couch grass from the copious flowers, spice and plants in the verdant braes of 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile*, and turns another leaf in the unraveling of traditional narrative in Muldoon's many combinations that traverse his individual volumes of poetry. Additionally, this periodic table of linguistic chemistry partly supplants Romantic and organicist ideas of poetry. This linguistic cell is not yet another simplistic retrospective disclosure of romantic ha-has as the quod also comprises Coleridge's falling out with Wordsworth on the subject and language of poetry, and the Byronic ambush on ideas of natural beauty and innocence. The Lucys, lights and shining stars of romanticism are eclipsed by this radiant alpha. Linguistic particles assume their words' worth in their deflocculation of simplistic romanticism. Romantic defloration is violently reproduced and ravished in the alphabetical iron maiden as a fall of an l from fall to fal, a fal of grass, a fal from grace and a fallacious fal from virginity in the autumn, a formal felony and linguistic deprivation, a stripping down of lyrical frills and texual innocence, a luscious lipogram in the textual body of the second stanza. This phalluscious gobble of the l is unheard, but easily detected by any member of the fetishists' association of kinky linguists, literary Peeping Toms and critical exhibitionists. Jouissant cunnilinguistics du jour, à la Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, transforms a bosomy broad of balladry into a frigorific Skeffington's daughter, aka scavenger's daughter, to hint of the almost inescapable phallogocentrism of language, one of the blind spots in Barthes' textual erotics that Derrida lays bare in *Of Grammatology*.

Apparently, in the letter stanza the salaam to the Romantic dies in a dye of black that casts the stanza in the visual shape of a one-spotted die upon the silence of a Malevitchian pristine page. This *coup de lettres*, this attempt to purify the letters of the text, this casting the dice once, never will abolish romance. In a period of ideological demythologisation and aesthetic desublimation the die appears as the ultimate manifestation of hazard at the heart of critical judgement. The visual incorporation of the die in the poem suggests that Muldoonian judgement functions in this case as an arbitrary quango attempting to decide between the anagrammatic anarchy of a belletristic orchestra and a horsecart of alphabetic faeces. In this nimble NIMBY, WYCIWUG.

The logogram provides a set-square to measure the angles of contemporary poetry of the past and the present. In the beginning was the word, and the four letter logogram, i.e. 'a l f a,' appears as a secular and pluralist tetragrammaton that also takes flight from Herbert's 'Easter Wings' and metaphysical *altar*natives. Muldoon's visual stanza belongs more to the imagist poetry of Carlos Williams' 'The Red Wheelbarrow.' Similarly, the poetic aerostat flows, grows and blows with Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer's O-obsession, quadratic stanza

and meditations upon language in 'Silencio.' Muldoon's lawn order also adds some structure to the hops of Cummings' 'r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r.' Muldoon's scientific correlative offers a strict structure to the liberties of Apollinairean calligrammes and modernist free verse. Possibly, this letter laboratory also acts as a catalyst in the Eliotic drive for scientific terminology in connection to the status of poetry and criticism in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' Muldoon, who 'thought Eliot was God,' also shares much of Eliot's anti-Romantic animus.

In its multiple associations, the logogram acts as a paradigm of pattern poems and concrete poetry that incorporate the genre's textual history. This genre piece's différance consists of sameness in the way the square resists using the traditional font, size and graphical variety of traditional ideogrammatic poetry. The mute chatterbox appears as an ironised textuality devoid of intentional phallacy. Language auto-enunciates itself in its own locutory space detached even from minimalist Beckettian organs of articulation such as are staged in Beckett's play *Not I*.

Such superimposed formalism, however, indicates a Yeatsian predilection for stanzaic frames, and in this arabesque, how can we know, not the dancers from the dance, but the letters from the letters? Alfalfic assonances relish the dripping anagram's succulent sound of falafel and are suggestive of the Arabic graft in the economic body of Western languages. In a time of Ayatollahs, fatwas and intifadas, the tetragram deconstructs Gauguinian exoticism and Poundian Sinology in its tracing of Arabic lexicultural formations within our own civilisation. Algebra, almanac and alcohol spring to mind as a minimal number of corner stones in our own cultural edifice that reflect the significance of Arabic mathematicians and scientists to occidental language, science and culture from the other civilisation that much of the Western world denigrates en bloc today. The alpha order also includes a dewy joke on decimal classification systems and the associations of the Alexandrine writers with libraries and first and foremost among them, Theocritus, and his pastoral poems and urban mimes from the quarters of Alexandria, the city of Callimachus, Ptolemaic take-overs and shifts in science precipitated by, for example, Archimedes, Euclid and Galen.

Alpha, a communications code for a, reinscribes itself as the core of the square omega. The various letters in the square form a graphic illustration of a quadrilateral upper case theta that breaks down into alphas, iotas and approximate gammas in which the centre constitutes a different sameness. Alfa and alpha are homonyms in which the different letters functions as a litmus letter to test the difference of writing and speaking in logocentric representation, and the reading and recital of poetry.

The belletristic magic square traverses physio-mathematical realms of science and signification. Within the alphameric square, the letters that are already caught up within the systems of algebra and formalism of logic represent themselves, and not an unknown integer or closed system of representing logical arguments in symbols. The table presents a finite number of alphabetic signs that suggests limitless repetition, addition, multiplication, division and extraction of roots, but these letters are not only algebraic letters, as they cannot be simply reduced to equations and ratios. In this respect, a l f a appears to consist of transcendental letters that cannot be the root of equations with rational coefficients. Alphamerics that present and represent are here encased within a quod that presents and represents. The small square, the QEF, the QED, *quod erat faciendum*, *quod erat demonstrandum*, quite elegantly shown, quite easily done, shows that which was to have been proved.

The quadrigram also functions as a surd that suspends the ratio of phonocentrism and numbers. The written difference of alfa and alpha is irreducible to phonetic representation and the undifferentiated strings of letters obliterate the whole system of sound division. All 'a's are wiped clean. The undecidability of feet and metrical stress in unaccented bars of letters upsets the body of poetry. No mean feet, indeed. The curious little number incorporates its own lack of numbers and infinite number lines, Arabic, odd and natural, Soller's or sexual, and the indeterminant engenders almost infinite multiplications, not as a bifurcated unit of multiplicity, but as infinite processes of possibilities.

The polytextual play and seamless semiosis of 'The Plot' provoke the impositions of frames and fractions to arrest the accidental and the aleatory, but these framings and fractionalisations augment the interpretational discursivity. Textual deconstruction not only destabilises the lingual and the formal criteria upon which the individual text is predicated, it also incites a heteronomy of hermeneutics that relativise the dominance of any singular approach. In its exemplarity 'The Plot' demonstrates how the parts of Muldoonian poetics that excel in imploding letters, forms and genres not only relate to relevant, preexistent discussions of aesthetics and text, but how they manage to counterpoise them and activate new controversy by exposing their hermeticism and inherent tensions.

Muldoon's hay plot offers a very concrete abstract of the play in *Hay*, and of Muldoonian poetics at large. In *Hay*, for example, 'The Plot' connects cognitively with the succeeding 'Tract:' 'I cleared the trees about my cabin, all // that came within range of a musket ball' (16). The contents of this pioneer poem have already been visualised by the cabin 'a l p h a' at the centre of all the 'a l f a l f a' trees, and the clear space between them, in the last stanza of 'The Plot.' 'The Plot' also situates itself, for example, as a halfway house to the

homoversicular 's t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s' of the parallelogrammatic 'A Half-Door near Cluny' (103). The erotic implications in 'The Plot' unfolds the string of sexual encounters in 'The Little Black Book' (86–88). The obvious postmodernist tendencies of 'The Plot' can also be related to 'The Mud Room' (*H*, 3–10), which offers a post-nationalist vision of what poetry, Irish-Judeo-American identifications and cultural integration might be in the contemporary global community. Along the same lines, the 'Hopewell Haiku' (*H*, 56–74) sequence entwines Western homeliness with explorations of Japanese thought currents and poetic conventions. The multistylistic riverbed of the 'The Plot' contains the intoxicated philosophical pleasures and catachrestic decompositions of 'Symposium' (27) and its repetitive alphalfa anticipates the exasperating monotony of the fifty identical 'hand' rhymes in 'They that Wash on Thursday' (53–85). The accessibility, use of assonance and sheer amplitude of 'The Plot' serve as prolegomena to the series of 'Sleeve Notes,' in which rock albums encapsulate time, mode and prosody as a transmutation into relative accessibility of Muldoon's abstruse *Madoc* method. Play on language and literature also characterises 'Anonymous: Myself and Pangur' (74), Muldoon's translation of a humorous, ninth-century poem written in the margin of a commentary on Virgil by an expatriate Irish monk in Austria, another Muldonic poem that plays and puns on such postmodernist leitmotifs as origin, identity, text and translation. Cognitive name cropping reappears in the humorous play on apocryphal texts, parentage and confusion of names in 'Third Epistle to Timothy' (97–103). Alfalpha appears as an auto-corrective agenda for 'Errata' – 'For "Antrim" read "Armagh" / For "mother" read "other," (88) – that comments ironically on Muldoon's proclivity to shape his poetry by linguistic haphazardness and undecidability as much as thematic structures and communicative rationale.

Plots, plays and the use of the alpha or 'a' sign in *Hay* are integrated into a Muldoonian poetics that extends from A to Z. The text of 'The Plot,' by cutting all corners and by connecting its letters and tendencies to other texts and volumes, for example 'As' in *Moy Sand and Gravel,* demonstrates a language-intensive alphaphilia that crops up again and again in other poems, stanzas and snippets, and in similar ideas, tricks, forms and letters. The use of the letter 'a' in 'The Plot' can be linked with Muldoon's alacrity for adversity that ranges from the electro-Edenic exodus of 'The Electric Orchard' in *New Weather* to the complex arrangements of Irish-American-Jewish-Arabian cultures and clashes in *Moy Sand and Gravel.* Similarly, the AC/DC of Romanticism is anticipated, for example, by the American prairie plains and Trojan plotting of urban lewdness in 'The Radio Horse' in *New Weather*. Letters, linguistics and in-formations characterise Muldoon's poetics from beginning to end, from the

multi coded asses and poles in the first poem in his debut collection, 'The Electric Orchard' in *New Weather*, via the metasemiosis in the final poem of *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, 'At the Sign of the Black Horses, September 1999,' to such fibs and foils as 'As' and 'On' in *Moy Sand and Gravel*, the riddles in 'Riddle' in *Horse Latitudes*, the seriousness of 'Nope' and 'Yup' in *Maggot* to the engagement with new digital language in 'Hard Drive' in *Moy Sand and Gravel* and 'Dirty Data' and '@' in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. These are just some examples of the poems in which Muldoon's awareness of language assumes linguistic control while at the same time remaining in awe of language. These poems, which add up to a considerable number across all his volumes, highlight Muldoon's way with language that also manifests itself in his philosophical allusion, syntactical strategies, incessant intertextuality and boundless vocabulary.

Many of the letters, examples and hermeneutics in the previous paragraphs on the plots and play of Muldoon's *Hay* are posted by Muldoon, frequently via Aristophanes, Derrida, Joyce and others, not least, several modernist poets. Some specimens of Muldoon's own convoluted, macaronic, neologistic lexicology that runs beyond the OED are: '"bleeding image" or "imarrhage,"' 'narthecality' and 'conglomewriting,' 'cryptocurrent,' 'Londonderridean,' 'canon and colcannon.'[24] The empty sign of 'quoof' in *Quoof* sires almost infinite spoofs, but also serious meditation on language, human relations and social structures. In his children's books that evince a colossal glossary, *The Last Thesaurus* displays his lexalalia, and *The Noctuary of Narcissus Batt* his abecedalia, to children of all ages. Muldoon's translation of Aristophanes' *The Birds* teems with Muldoonisms: 'Ombirdsman,' 'Supergrouse,' 'Nebulbulfast,' 'Gerry Mander,' 'Allafuckians from Ballymoaney' and 'Queen Maybe.'[25] These Muldoonian transformations of letters, words and poetic forms signal a lively, lewd and vital love of words and language, a type of kinky linguistics and pleasure in the text that oppose ordinary linguistic government, literary prudery and ideological foreclosure.

The alphaphilia and the deconstruction of binary form in Muldoon's language, which reach its most concrete example in 'The Plot,' suggests another Muldoonian alterrative. Its alphabetic introversion and letter animation stop the longer story in its tracks to focus on its smallest constituent and this stop in its turn initiates and prompts other associations and interpretational activities.

24 Muldoon, 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' 113; *To Ireland, I*, 5, 64; *The End of the Poem*, 13, 26, 27; 'Canon and Colcannon: Review of *The Rattle of the North* by Patricia Craig,' 22.

25 Paul Muldoon, *The Birds* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1999), 8, 42, 49, 51–52, 79.

These introverted procedures and plays can be said to serve a number of purposes beyond their own linguistic significations. This linguistics of the single letter operates at the opposite end of grand narratives and larger discourses, as if it intentionally aims to arrest the stream of language by philosophers, politicians and pundits at its very source in order to scrutinise sceptically their way with words and language. An intimate interrogation of language itself increases awareness of the myriad ways in which language works beyond reference and ordinary communication – an almost given interest to any poet. Such insouciant and irreverent raids upon the habitual logic of language, in its anti-establishment animus, support creative and critical approaches to other systems and institutions of power and government in our daily life. In one important context of its publication, Northern Ireland in the 1990s, 'The Plot' and *Hay* constitute an alternative to a poetics of violence and, equally much, a challenge to the language of religious doctrine, political rhetoric and journalistic jargon. Even more, the unacknowledged legislation of Muldoon's language in 'The Plot' opposes directly the many geographical divisions, social schisms, political partitions, ideological bifurcations of the statelet: the inveterate binary structures which appear so hard to counteract. Even such a fierce detractor of deconstruction as Terry Eagleton concedes the radical force of the ludic and the lascivious as energies resistant to power control, and sees 'language and sexuality' as primary sites of insurgency, 'a pleasure and playfulness not wholly under the heel of power.' Addresssing more directly the structural confines of Northern Ireland, he argues:

> Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in some ways confront each other as alien and fear the dissolution of their own identities by the contamination of the other. This is the aspect of the situation which postmodernism is good at grasping.[26]

'The Plot' and many of the other poems and procedures in *Hay*, in their performative aspects, present moments of radical impetus and creative possibilities for future formations of language, thought and society, especially in Northern Ireland. It should be noted here that the peace process in Northern Ireland gained new and significant momentum after the Republic of Ireland changed the wording of Articles Two and Three in their written constitution, and after Great Britain/the British government issued statements of clarirification concerning the constitutional arrangements for Britain and Northern Ireland.

26 Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 4, 127. See also his lambast 'The Ideology of Irish Studies,' 5–14.

New kinds of language in Muldoon's poetry provoke in challenging and performative modes new types of cognition and emotion. Sometimes these novelties engage with sophistry and serioludic gaming for a number of artistic purposes. And sometimes these novelties engage with profound human concerns: death, life, birth, language. Always, these novelties strive to present in new language the human condition.

Muldoon's exorbitant imarrhages and illogorhythms and deconstructive poetics engage profoundly with the tragedies of human cruelty, with social divisions and with civil outrage from a larger perspective, as much as within the frame of Northern Ireland. In *Hay* 'Aftermath' corresponds directly with 'The Plot' and 'Tract' as another cognitive rhyme, with similarities of language, form and meaning. In a tone and with themes that recall 'Lull' from *Why Brownlee Left*, 'Aftermath,' in its linguistic strategies and formal involutions, questions human malevolence and ritual violence way beyond the conflict of Northern Ireland. The poem overlaps with 'The Plot' in rural setting, natural cycles and agricultural rhythms. However, 'Aftermath' also incorporates the violence of letters, and the cutting short of story, debate and argument in 'The Plot.' It also opposes notions of romantic love, however diminished, with explicit hatred, murder and triumphalism. It answers with the full blast of essence, identity and completion to the deconstruction, difference and dividedness of 'The Plot.' Natural cycles clash with manmade retaliations of killing and violence. Two patriots sing and salute – 'Let us now drink' (93) – their execution and devastation of an enemy and his estate, 'a neighbor in his own aftermath, who hangs still / between two sheaves / like Christ between two tousle-headed thieves' (93). 'Aftermath,' in its sense of second crop and consequence, places the murder in a rural setting and captures the desecration of the corpse in the image of 'his body wired up to the moon' (93). The word also includes the carousal and celebrations of the perpetrators after the murder. An allusion to Christ indicates a long cycle of execution, a Girardian structure of mimetic violence, and hints that the murder might be prompted by religious animosity.[27] At the same time, Christ, as the ultimate scapegoat of mankind, highlights questions of justice and forgiveness. In this respect, 'Aftermath' appears in the wake of Heaney's 'neighbourly murder' in 'Funeral Rites,' the questioning of 'Punishment' in *North* and the interrogations of justice in 'Casualty' from *Field*

27 For René Girard's mimetic structures of violence and their relations to religion and literature, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Continuum, [1972] 2005); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *Job, the Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). For a reading of Northern Irish poetry in the light of Girard's ideas, see Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence*.

Work as a new instalment in the intertextual dialogue between the two, and as a new aria upon metaphysical justice, capital punishment, national systems of jurisdiction and kangaroo courts in the poetry of Northern Ireland during the war, as discussed in many of the essays in *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*.[28] Structure and dissolutions inhere in both 'The Plot' and 'Aftermath.' In its tripartite composition and trinitarian rhymes, 'Aftermath' counteracts the binaries of 'The Plot,' alluding to the Holy Trinity, and referring to triptych iconography with echoes of Gaelic triads; it might also be said to configure the trilateral relations of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom or England. A circular structure of harmony in the refrain – 'let us now drink' – that appears at the beginning, middle and end – contains the internal divisions in a toast that is raised to fraternal loyalty or patriotism as well as to hatred. Internal rhyme, 'patriot cry to patriot,' and terms of endearment, 'my love,' indicate strongly that a strong love of land and family fuels the feud. Three sections and fifteen lines inscribe divisions and afterthought to the conventional stanza of love, the sonnet. The sonnet, Muldoon's favourite form of in-formation throughout all his volumes, poses a set form of flexibility and variation against the semi-organicism of the meta-ballad and the liberties of concrete poetry in 'The Plot' to suggest in textual transfigurations the reorganisations of larger political and social structures. Similarly, one line too many – 15 – in 'Aftermath' signals excess and transgression. In like manner, rondeauish rhymes tend to reflect mimetic violence and relinquish any hesitation to the cycles of revenge. Constructions of abrasive, contrary and corrupted formal designs reveal the attrition of conflict and the corrosion of morals. The poem ends:

> Only a few nights ago, it seems, they set fire to a big house and it got
> so preternaturally hot
> we knew there could be no reprieve
> till the swallows' nests under the eaves
> had been baked into these exquisitely glazed little pots
> from which, my love, let us now drink. (93)

The aftermath and the structure of the poem indicate that this scene of looking back on the return to the site of destruction portrays a third violent incident in the spiral of retaliation. The astonishing contrast of violent destruction and the celebratory mood is almost as shocking as the violence itself. Murder

28 Heaney, *North*, 7, 30–31 and *Field Work*, 21–25; Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong, eds., *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).

and mayhem come as natural as singing and drinking. Muldoon's ability to acknowledge and to present a type of callousness unusual to a humanist sensibility and in one who practices the arts, or, as in these verses, to combine the two, is upsetting and unforgettable. In this respect, 'Aftermath' doubles up with 'Medley for Muhrin Khur' (*HL,*89) as two of his most arresting poems. The aftermath in the final stanza in 'Aftermath' gives a cynical twist to the Wordsworthian dictum of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility. Murder, big house burning, retaliatory violence and destruction of natural innocence are recorded in high artifice beyond sympathy and antipathy, but with striking apprehension. In language, form and subject matter 'Aftermath' evokes the darkened conditions of human life, an alienated condition, as it will seem, to many poetry readers.

Muldoon's mastery of language presents in its alphabetic eclecticism and formal mutability cognitive, tragic and ludic aspects of our human condition, frequently in the same poem. Language habitually becomes the point of its own poetry, assumes metaphorical functions, and bristles with divergent purposes beyond reference, etymology and referential control. 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' (*H,* 74–75) shows that preoccupations with language can be sprightly, and that they can provide immersive diversity in the larger scheme of things. The poem starts smoothly. And abruptly.

> Myself and Pangur, my white cat,
> have much the same calling, in that
> much as Pangur goes after mice
> I go hunting for the precise
>
> word. (74)

In the poem, a scribe juxtaposes his search for words for his translation with a cat's hunting and killing of a mouse. The poet moves around in his confine of language as the cat prowls around in his compound of life. They both work in the cloister's scriptorium. They both chase their prey, for fun as much as anything else. An early enjambment illustrates the translation process of hunting down terms that often escape the mind like mice from a cat. To introduce the second stanza with a stressed syllable and stopped sentence indicates the stumbling processes of translation in the broader spheres of phonology and syntax beyond the mere lexical chase. That the specific word that initiates this sentence is actually 'word,' foregrounds the poem's linguistic concerns. Within Muldoon's poetic universe this conceit of cat and poet is surprisingly accessible, easy and agreeable. The cat, much revered and reviled in history, is here a

charming creature of companionship and point of comparison. Cats are hard to hear and are not generally animals who group together; they are solitary, unlike dogs. Muldoon and the persona identify with the cat, and respect its authority and independence: 'He and I are much the same' (74). They have similar tasks and interests: 'Something of his rapture / at his most recent mouse-capture / I share when I, too, get to grips / with what has given me the slip' (74). To find *le mot juste* or to ensnare the prey is challenging, and requires a swift mind as most poets and translators know. The reward is gratifying, however. Four feminine rhyme words in the poem, 'cloister – lustre' and 'rapture – capture,' introduce sensual vibrations that form part of the Barthesian pleasures of the text, for the writer and the reader. However, the cat also moves with the autonomy, rhythms and stealth of poetry itself, certainly this poem does. The cat's hunt for the mouse shapes the poem's agile movements of smoothness, jerks and jolts. Muldoon scales down his ordinary range of allusion, lexical abundance and imaginative diversity. Even his rhyming panache assumes the conventional form of couplets to stress the similarity between the two artists at play. On the other hand, or probably better, on the other foot, the slinking on and off the octosyllabic metronome creates an original rhythm, some very feline feet and distinct paws of prosody. Likewise, the enjambments' deferral forces open the closure of the traditional quatrains; the lines, like the cat, move contrarirwise. Or perhaps these are the moves of line, metre and feet that, like a mouse, escape, at least for some time, the tightening grip of convention? The mellifluous s-sounds of the final couplet – 'while I, sharp-witted, swift and sure, / shed light on what had seemed obscure' (75) – echo fittingly the traditional alliteration of the Gaelic bards. The scribe in the poem is often bent upon the *Georgics* and its content; a light recognition of the status of many classical non-biblical text in the work of the medieval libraries, and an internal reference to the importance of Virgil and his works in Muldoon's *Hay*.

'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' is Muldoon's translation of a medieval poem that an Irish monk wrote in the *Reichenau Primer* in his cloister on the continent in the ninth century. Translation reaches to the core of what language means and how it functions in the relations between nations, culture and peoples. Friel's *Translations* (1980) and Field Day's tour with the play established this phenomenon of language as a template for cognitive and creative endeavour in Northern/Ireland in the decades that followed. Rui Homem's critical analyses of poetry of and as translation in *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland* (2009) provides a masterpiece in this field. The purposes and methods of how to exchange ideas, thoughts, arts and acts between different parties who communicate by different means, and often by different ideology, cognitive structures, aesthetic principles and ways of living, share a lot of similarities with poetry itself, in addition to translations of poetry. The creative acts

of translation also offer insights into the individual poet's own writing, as Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson's and Derek Mahon's many translations demonstrate with such force. Muldoon writes with great enthusiasm and eloquence on the importance of translation to his own writing:

> I've been fascinated by the art of translation since I was a teenager in Armagh, when my Irish teacher, Sean O'Baoill, encouraged me and my fellow students to submit for consideration by *The Irish Press* our renderings into English of Irish poems. The confidence he had in us, mere schoolboys, was transformative. It was as if we were ourselves translated into writerdom, with a sense that writing was, among other things, a job of journeywork for which we were eligible to apply.[29]

Muldoon has previously been involved in translations of Gaelic poetry with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, has translated from poetry in other languages – 'Rainer Marie Rilke: *Black Cat*' on the next page is the closest one in this context, but Muldoon has done many others too – and his many ekphrastic poems and joint artistic projects with painters, musicians and photographers extend his catalogue of translations across artistic media.[30] Then there is the translation between American English and Hiberno and British English, a hard one because the English 'have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language,' as the narrator in Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' reminds us. The situation in 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' of an Irish monk in Austria in the ninth century writing a witty secular poem in the margin of a religious book of prayer and devotion captures many of the intersections of Muldoon's traversals across languages and media. In the monk's situation, Muldoon hears his own 'footfalls already pre-empted by their echoes,' to make use of his own eloquent quote from Beckett in his conclusion to 'The

29 Paul Muldoon, 'When the Pie Was Opened,' (Paris: Center for Writers and Translators, 2008), 9.

30 For Muldoon's translations with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, see *The Fifty Minute Maid*, trans. Paul Muldoon (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2007); *The Astrakhan Cloak*, trans. Paul Muldoon (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1992). He has translated Aristophanes' *The Birds* from Greek with Richard Martin, *The Birds* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1999). For work across the disciplines of arts, see his libretti, and work with painters and sculptors: Paul Muldoon and Daron Hagen, *Vera of Las Vegas* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2001); *Bandana* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); *Shining Brow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); Paul Muldoon and Rita Duffy, *At Sixes and Sevens* (Dublin: Stoney Road Press, 2013); *Cloth* (Portadown: Millenium Courts Arts Centre, 2007); Paul Muldoon and Keith Wilson, *Wayside Shrines* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2009); Paul Muldoon and Norman McBeath, *Plan B* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2009).

Key' (*Mad*, 4). The context of 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' contains many parallels between the scribe and Muldoon's situation as an academic poet in voluntary exile in America. The ancient poem indicates the textual processes of the incomplete and fragmented reconstruction of Irish and European history in which the diaspora supplement some of the gaps.[31] The monk's contribution to the continuation of classical culture participates in the formation of a European culture on the margins of which Ireland was precariously placed. Muldoon's translation of the Irish monk's poem affirms the status of his own writings as deriving from the many margins of Hiberno-Anglo-American cultural positionings as they also come from the centre of Northern Irish history, always one consistent hermeneutic framework for his poetry. Within Muldoon's intratextuality a cat called Pangur also sneaks around, almost imperceptibly , in 'The Mudroom,' and 'Hopewell Haiku' (*H*, 4, 57, 63, 65), as does the other cat, Pyewacket, in other places. The Irish monk entitled his poem 'Pangur Bán,' 'Fair Pangur.' On the next page Muldoon's translation of the anonymous writer meets its counterpart in Muldoon's translation of Rilke's 'Black Cat.'

Muldoon's concern with cats in this collection, especially Pangur Ban, can be read as a contrast to his canine poems, for example 'Bran' (WBL, 12), and as an extension of his strong and sustained equestrian interests, or another animal in his bestiary that also includes a hedgehog, birds, fish, otters, seals, and the play on dinosaurs in *The Last Thesaurus.*[32] The act of chasing a mouse as an analogy for catching the right word has a wider implication in the tradition of Irish literature: which cat catches the best mouse? 'Pangur Bán' has been translated by a long list of poets, W.H. Auden, Seamus Heaney, Robin Flower, Frank O'Connor, Eavan Boland and Miriam Gamble among them. A translation of Pangur Bán is one rite of passage for many poets, and figures in the sodality of imaginative rivalry in poetry circles. And in a larger circle: which of the many cat poems, often hard to find and hard to gather, are the best? How should we select the poems of greatest interest and merit from a long list that would include Edward Lear's' 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat' and W.B. Yeats's 'The Cat and the Moon' to Eliot, Rilke and Muldoon's intriguing and diminutive creatures? For what reasons? In its own smooth, small way, 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' slinks in the shadows before and after Ó'Tuama and Kinsella's *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed 1600–1900* (1981)

31 For a witty presentation of the importance of Ireland's monastic culture to European history, see Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995). For a more socio-historical account of Irish diasporic identities, see Tim Pat Coogan, *Wherever Green Is Worn* (London: Arrow Books, 2002).

32 For Muldoon's interest in animals, see Paul Muldoon, ed. *The Faber Book of Beasts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

and Louis de Paor's *Poems of Repossession* (2016), neither of which include the classic poem. In the conversations among poets in and around Belfast, the poem can be read as a comment on Longley's quip that Muldoon 'can rhyme a cat with a dog.'[33] 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*,' like 'Quoof,' is a lovely little beast in the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry.

'The Plot,' 'Aftermath' and 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' together constitute language poems in *Hay* that are packed from the first letter to the final sign with a serioludic corrective to cognitive and socio-political polarisation, combined with critique of identitarian community, and with entertainingly innovative exchanges of language, history and culture. Entirely distinct forms and features of language create as much meaning and provoke as much hermeneutic speculation as their signified and referential dimensions do in some of the other conspicuous Muldonic language poems in *Hay*. The equivocalness, the homonymous, the runic and the erroneous – many of the unstable, confluent, recalcitrant and random qualities of language that supervene confuse, refract and disorient ordinary usage of language, of which, admittedly, there is very little in Muldoon's poetry – highlight themselves with lambency and incisiveness in 'The Point,' 'They that Wash on Thursday,' 'Errata' and 'Rune.' The title of first one of these, 'The Point,' comes with a promise of clarification that tends to be as much deferred as delivered. Its equivocation in this respect corresponds with the confirmations and conundrums of 'The Key' in *Madoc.* Its titular rhyme with 'The Plot' to come indicates that language, narrative and denouement are crucial parts of this poem too. The order in which these two poems appear in *Hay* is hardly accidental. What happens if you place the point before the plot, the denouement before the action, the conclusion before the argumentation, the murderer before the mystery, the sign before the referent, the signifier before the signified, and language before everything? These tend to be some of the Muldonic implications in the order of things here. Naturally, the poem also presents its own points, but these are not readily discernible. The poem begins with negations of literature, war and history by stressing what appears to be far from the point: 'Not Sato's sword,' 'Not the dagger that Hiroo Onoda / would use' (10). The reference to Yeats's life and poetry tends to reject both verse and violence. The reference to Hiroo Onoda – the Japanese soldier who did not realise the war was over and fought the Americans from

33 The witty catch phrase that Muldoon can rhyme a cat with a dog was in all probability a humorous remark by fellow poet Michael Longley or professor Edna Longley. Muldoon records poetically the incident in *The Prince of the Quotidian* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994), 29. He also refers to the incident in his interview with John Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 141.

1942 to 1974 and who wrote the autobiography *No surrender* – extends by proxy the negations of intransigence and belated war to the more contemporary contexts of Northern Ireland. The main point in Muldoon's poem seems to be the tip of a pencil: 'O'Clery, my school-room foe, / rammed his pencil into my exposed *thigh* / (not, as the chronicles have it, my calf) / with such force that the point was broken off' (10). Not much of a point, it seems, compared to the grand conflicts of war and the literary tradition associated with warfare. However, the graphic image of the pencil graphite dissolving in the veins of the persona portrays an artist who has the tool and mineral of writing running naturally in his bloodstream. And this image has a point or two. The poems and pencils of other foes and fellows dissolve and disappear, but their verse runs on in the veins of other writers in the same school. The downscaling of grand narratives of war and canon to the small episodes of squib and classroom can be read as a modest manifesto against martial poetics, and as a gesture towards undercutting canonical writers in the repeated bathetic allusions to Yeats and Heaney's poetry in Muldoon's. Still, 'The Point' can be read as another wording of the phrase that the pencil is mightier than the sword, and a parallel to the turning from gun to pen in Heaney's apologia for poetry in his debut poem, 'Digging.' Muldoon's poem appears more equivocal. The violence these lines remonstrate with are reduplicated in the foe's pencil stab. So, to some extent this poem too stems from a physical shock of violence. There also seems to be a subtext of retaliation: the poet now, finally, after all these years, gets his own back on his old enemy. Such revenge also extends to old literature and outdated language; the parenthetical correction of 'chronicles' and 'calf' (10). Furthermore, the poet relishes these retaliations as the choice of sonnet form, the standard genre of love and affection in all their ambivalent and antagonistic complexities, reveals. Consequently, these verses undermine the promise of the title: there is no point – rather, there are many, complex perspectives, and these are often far from self-evident.

The teasing out of many meanings of single words in such poems as 'The Point' and 'Hay' reaches its most concentrated form in 'They that Wash on Thursday' (27). All fifty lines of this semi-autobiographical account end in the word 'hand.' Counterparts to Muldoon's word concentration can be identified in the many prints of the same potato in the visual art of Mary Farl Powers, or the new music for single notes and themes in the piano pieces of György Ligety and Arvo Pärt – three other types of minimalist art conducted by mind and hands. The poem implies Muldoon's own labour of linguistic hygiene and resorts to *antanaclasis*, the figure of speech of reiteration of the same word in different senses. Muldoon's word repetitions must be the most extensive homonymous homily in the canon. A monotonous repetition of the same

quotidian word dampens the stanza's lexical range and artistic diversity. Still, this squeezing of semantics manifests its own creativity via the maximisation of meanings in a single word under the structure of prosody. To offer at least fifty-one possible meanings of the same word in a single poem is clearly one for the books: has anyone done this before? Probably not, for a number of reasons. The refinement of homily to its furthest reaches is a rare event in poetry, and to the extent it exists, probably no one has pushed this strategy to the extremes Muldoon does in these lines. Identical rhymes are habitually considered as non-rhymes or poor rhymes, so Muldoon certainly challenges the conventional understanding of rhyme and reason too. The overload of homonyms militates against the logic of synonyms – Addison would turn in his grave.[34] 'Hand' in this poem gives multiple meanings of the same word, as opposed to the putative logic of synonyms as giving a large number of words with the same meaning (a fallacious assumption: if you make use of other words you express different meanings). The multiplication of meanings also extends to such poems as 'The Right Arm' and 'The Hands' in *Quoof,* and the many other places in which this part of the body occurs, not least the memorable hands in 'Incantata:' 'arrah, / and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink' (*AC*, 28). 'In They that Wash on Thursday' Muldoon has set himself an unusual poetic task probably prompted more by his interest in language than from the tools and traditions of poetry. That hands can be used for much else than washing and making hay is pretty clear.

'Symposium' shows the same kind of linguistic interests. These two poems also connect along lexical and semi-autobiographical lines, within the field of this particular volume:

> A bird in hand is better than no bread.
> To have your cake is to pay Paul.
> Make hay while you can still hit the nail on the head. (27)

Catachresis, like homonyms and identical rhymes, appears seldom as a stylistic device in poetry. Abuse or perversion of tropes and mixed metaphors do not belong to the main routes of poetry. Again, Muldoon revels in a linguistic phenomenon that takes him a long way down a road traditionally less travelled by poets. Catachresis, another hedgehog, another quoof, appears as a hybrid. In Muldoon's poetic world of cognitive rhymes, it is serendipitous, perhaps, that the term for describing his linguistic technique in these verses, catachresis, starts with cat. Thus, this language poem also links up with 'Anonymous:

34 Joseph Addison, 'True and False Wit.'

Myself and Pangur' in its unperturbed autonomy and wayward humour. They also share a vast historical hinterland as well as important contemporary contexts. 'Symposium' plays on the festive gathering of intellectuals and artists and revellers from Plato's academy and eponymous text to Paul's Princeton, just like Muldoon's cat poem couples the medieval text and practice with the situation of current poets. Its diverging from the poetic main road, its mangling of proverbs and its cut and paste techniques belong to Muldoon's alternative literature, eclectic language and new narrative, and these catachrestic language dynamics signpost the way to the many cross-cuttings of words and stories in the final alterrative in the volume: 'The Bangle: (Slight Return).'

'Errata.' Muldoon has a way with words. And titles. 'Errata' appears on page 88. Obviously, something has now gone wrong, but what, where, when, how and why? The title and the long list of corrections in the poem catch some of the tedium and repetition of the editing and publication process. With no sender, addressee or page references, this addendum manifests the spirit of control and correction. In its decontextualised presentation, there are few restrictions on the potential poets and poems Muldoon might have in mind for these admonitions. As more often than not in Muldoon's poems, 'Errata' also grapples with larger ideas and structures beyond its own words and language. Yet the document also targets Muldoon's own language, books and poems. 'Symposium,' with all its incorrect proverbs, is one likely text on which to apply this appended list of corrections. In an even more immediate context, the addendum relates to 'The Little Black Book,' the preceding abecedarium of amorous alliances. Is there something wrong with the language in this ghazal? Or form? With the morals? With the women? Or the attitude to women? Or the focus, as all couplets end up 'between her legs?' (87). Probably not in Muldoon's own books, and in many of his readers' and other people's, but 'Errata' manifests an intra-poetic awareness of questions of language, morals and the many sides of the human condition that Muldoon tends to present in novel ways. In this context, 'Errata' comments on both 'Symposium' and 'The Little Black Book,' as both poems revel in the promiscuity of language and life; and these poems are only two examples of all the poems in the volume that could be read under the corrective lens of 'Earrata.' A third example is 'Now, Now,' in which 'life is indeed no more than "a misprint in the sentence of death"' (23). In fact, the volume's concluding poem 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' appears as a poem conceived and written under the censure of 'Errata,' as its many auto-corrections illustrate. In the wider sphere of correctives, 'Errata' can be read in parallel with Heaney's 'Punishment.' Muldoon's poem gains further meaning in the context of auto-correction and amendment in Beckett's *How It Is* and Yeats's poem, 'Man and the Echo,' and his play, *Purgatory*. However, the eight

homoformal quatrains present twenty-eight very clear correctives similar to the first four lines:

> For 'Antrim' read 'Armagh.'
> For 'mother' read 'other.'
> For 'harm' read 'farm.'
> For 'feather' read 'father.' (88)

For all their imperative directness, these correctives are hard to place because they are pageless. Nevertheless, they are not entirely redundant. Given Muldoon's alphabetic approach to letters, law and life in his writing, it makes sense that the first erratum starts with an a. Furthermore, 'Antrim' and 'Armagh,' like the conception of the whole poem, tend to follow straight from the lust for text, line and rhyme that more often than not govern the logics of Muldoon's intrapoeticality. 'I fluttered, like an erratum slip, between her legs' (87), concludes 'The Little Black Book.' So, primarily, this poem is conceived by the intriguing metaphor of 'erratum slip' and the Muldonic chime phonetics of erratum, Antrim, Armagh. Promiscuity and explicit language in 'The Little Black Book' also invite censorious action. In the critical discourses of poetry in and of Northern Ireland it is certainly very hard not to read the comment as a corrective to all the focus on the Belfast Group. Within the bipartisan sociopolitical structures of Northern Ireland the instruction might reflect a shift in the balance between the plush and the peaceful often associated with Antrim, and the contested and conflictual often associated with Armagh, at the time before and through the peace process. Speculation proves as significant as interpretation in these quatrains. The ambivalence and alienation of 'mother' and 'other' evoke the confusion between the two in 'Milkweed and Monarch' in the previous volume, *The Annals of Chile*, as well as the absence of a mother figure in this volume, and the whole question of Muldoon's presentation in poetry of his mother. Within the wider discourses of poetry this erratum indicates, just like '[Kristeva]' in *Madoc*, a complex attitude to feminist literary theory and wider issues of otherness. The two subsequent lines open up for rereading and revising the combinations of violence and agriculture found in *Hay* and beyond, as much as of fathers and father figures, just as the remaining twenty-four lines operate in a vacuum of decontextualised correction. These corrective tendencies include language and the wider dimension of hermeneutics.

'For' starts every line of 'Errata.' These unhabitually sentence-placed thirty-two identical non-rhymes or poor rhymes mirror and modify the significance of the fifty homonyms of hand in 'They that Wash on Thursday.' This double prioritisation, the foregrounded repetition of 'for', suggests that 'Errata'

highlights, demonstrates and activates the Muldonic preference for the anomalous, the irregular and the deviant, much more than it sets up a list of correctives. 'Errata' showcases how everything that stands corrected in the language of Muldoon's poetry belongs to the parts of his poetry most conducive to new meanings and new interpretations. The allegedly correct articulates smoothly any type of content along the currents of language and conventional logic. The incongruous, the hedgehogy, the inverted, the *unheimlich* and *derouté* arrest and amplify the flow of signs and semantics: the misprinted italicisation throughout the first edition of *New Weather* prompted imaginative interpretations on offered estrangement, 'Quoof' stimulates interpretation by its incomprehensibility, 'The Plot' precipitates almost endless points and play, and 'Aftermath' deals profoundly with serious questions. Muldoon's narrathanotographies and alterratives present the aleatory, the precarious, and what might have been and what might be of the human condition. 'Errata' flaunts the notion that it is far more productive to rhyme a cat with a dog than a hat, and that to err is not only human, it can be productive and rewarding. In the theories of literature, the importance of errors has gained critical currency by the use of the term and concept of 'misprision' in Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. Muldoon excels in the genre: his misreadings of '*Il Duce* of Drumcliffe' (*AC*, 145), i.e. Yeats, vitalise the poetry of both, as do his continuous correctives to Heaney. His many errata to himself, in this poem and other incessant installments of semi-ironic self-flagellation, also create new meanings out of old readings, and new glimpses of new meanings. That such writings, readings and meanings are important to the creative and critical arts of Muldoon is more than indicated in the final imperative of 'Errata:' 'For "loom" read "bloom."'

Misprision, Bloom's term for a strong writer's cutting himself some slack under the canonical pressures of his forefathers by misreading or misinterpreting their work, also integrates other compounds derived from misdemeanor and prison. Bloom's term echoes judicial meanings of wrongful act and omissions, or the misprision of treason. Despite their apparent contrast, treason and tradition share the same etymological roots and constitute binary dynamics. Tradition and treason are derived from the Latin *traditio,* which is derived from the verb *tradere*, meaning to deliver or hand over. The decision of who hands over what to whom constitutes both tradition and treason. Tradition hands over smoothly the acknowledged and the approved, treason and betrayal hand over contentiously the unacknowledged and the unapproved, often to other hands. Tradition is thus frequently predicated upon the negation and exclusion of alternative pasts, present or futures. Seen through the prism of critical theory rather than patriotic national interests, by the same reason, treason is the term given to new possibilities and new traditions. Many traditions stem from acts of treason, many acts of treason establish new traditions.

Jack M. Balkin notes the following three ways in which ideas of 'tradition and betrayal are closely linked:'

> First, [to respect tradition] is to forsake other alternatives for the future [...] Second, to respect tradition is also to betray other existing and competing traditions, to submerge and extinguish them. It is to establish through this suppression the hegemony of a particular way of thinking [...] Third, a tradition is often, in an uncanny way, a betrayal of itself. [...] To establish and enshrine a tradition is thus at the same time to establish a countertradition – a seamy underside consisting of what society also does and perhaps cannot help but do, but will not admit to doing. The overt, respectable tradition depends upon the forgetting of its submerged, less respectable opposite, even as it thrives and depends on its existence in unexpected ways.[35]

Consequently, treason and tradition are interrelated, co-dependent and dynamic: the imposition of one specific tradition is treacherous in itself, it betrays all the other possibilities. 'Errata' signals very powerfully a continuance of the alternatives for the future that have been forsaken, it points towards the remergence and the rekindling of the many that have been suppressed by the hegemony of the one and the righteous, and it gestures towards the seamy underside of language, law, society and cognition. Struggles over the government and control of language come heavily loaded with implications for the structures with which language interacts. Language refracts as much as it contains and references. The many misprisions of 'Errata' upset the living stream of the contained and the controlled like stones in a living stream. 'Errata' is, in many ways, like 'Quoof,' a Derridean monstrosity that exists in the shadows of the articulate and the presentable. In its wide-ranging decontextualisation and undecidablility, 'Errata' assumes an ambiguous metaphysical aura of regret and shamelessness.

Muldoon's misprisional poetics, of which 'Errata' presents a showcase, serves a number of functions in keeping with its linguistic preposterousness. As An exultation of the erroneous and the productive powers of autocorrection and self-critique, it dispels the religious premise of the human subject as secondary to divine powers. It thus runs counter to a form of thinking that extends from biblical concepts of original sin via church dogma, rituals and sacrament to an lengthy tradition in literature from Augustine's *Confessions*

35 Jack M. Balkin, 'Tradition, Betrayal, and the Politics of Deconstruction,' 1990, Faculty Scholarship Series, Paper 283, http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/283.

to confessional poetry. Joyce counteracts this reign of subjugation in *A Portrait of the Artist* and in parts of *Dubliners*. Muldoon's specific admonition to Heaney in his review of *Station Island,* the Nobel Laureate's purgatorial volume, offers another encounter between the two: 'General Absolution is too much even for a Catholic confessional poet to hope for.'[36] In a more mundane frame of reference, a focus on the flawed and the faulty as integrated and enabling aspects of human life countervails the long catalogue and present industry of self-help, self-promotion, self-confidence and selfies that make Narcissus appear like an altruistic community servant.

Whereas 'Errata' finds in the world of publishing its linguistic template for how the present might elevate or edit certain positions in the past for the possibilities of an improved future, 'Rune' resorts to an entirely different template. Futhark and runic alphabets of pre-Latin German languages convey an atmosphere of lost language, archival knowledge and historic culture for this almost indecipherable tale. At least some of the phenomena under correction in 'Errata' attend to an accessible alphabet, concrete words and some sense of common understanding; much of this common ground is taken away in 'Rune.' Muldoon professes an 'urge towards the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible' and much of this urge manifests itself in these disorientating verses.[37] 'What can I tell you?' runs the first line in the poem. Snippets of information, metaphors, words and questions to come indicate stories – or is it the same story? – of love, self-transformation, blood money, cut-throat capitalism, paramilitary extortion. Nine couplets stress the intimacy, doubleness and binarism of the stories and several identical rhymes emphasise the confluence of identities and stories. Unfound information, fractures and incoherence make the solving of this ruse as hard as rune reading and rune casting. The poem ends: 'Go figure' (96). Evidently, a very adamant anti-communicative attitude dominates the poem. The verses vent artistic anger with the relentless demands for accessibility, ease of comprehension, reassurance and the like upon poetry and poets – critical impositions upon which much reviewing of Muldoon's poetry is often based. Its non-compliant attitude achieves larger hermeneutic space by means of Adorno's negative aesthetics, where the negational aspect of autonomy in art is imperative.[38] As another typical language poem, in which exhortation of a detail in the semiotic seas approaches much

36 Muldoon, 'Sweaney Peregraine,' 20.

37 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 5.

38 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London and Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1984 [1970]). Beckett reigns as the overshadowing figure in Adorno's involvement with literature: 'Trying to Understand Endgame,' *New German Critique* 26 ([1961] 1982), 119–150.

larger ideas of meaning and interpretation, the mining of meanings in 'Rune' corresponds with 'The Point' and 'The Plot' and with 'Hay' and 'They that Wash on Thursday' and 'Aftermath' to reinforce our sense of the significance of language in Muldoon's writing.

Many of the linguistic turns, techniques and themes that develop throughout *Hay* are signaled in the first poem, 'The Mud Room,' and end recursively in the final long finish, 'The Bangle (Slight Return).' This astonishing opening fanfare replete with intertextual and language-clotted intricacies of what post-nationalist life might be continues the deferral and subtle differentiation of rhyme patterns that started with 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile*, and that spreads via 'Third Epistle to Timothy' to the final poem in this volume. The rhymes that are devloped from the first four stanzas of 'Yarrow' and throughout that poem – 'Row,' 'pink,' 'us,' 'da,' 'arm,' 'wheel,' 'tarp,' 'oil,' 'rare,' *Deo*,' 'stream' and 'land' – continue in the first verses of 'The Mud Room:' 'narrow,' 'brink,' 'plus', 'Jura,' 'rim,' 'wheel,' 'scarp,' 'gargoyle,' and 'robe.' But there seems to be no place for the *italicised* word for God in this mundane closet. Furthermore, 'The Mud Room' transplants the associative seeds of 'Yarrow' and 'Hay,' it reverberates with the volume's sprockets and sounds, it turns the volume's letters and lines with stops and run-ons, it crosses a lexical gamut of words, it offers an alternative imaginative domesticity to Heaney's public point of view in 'The Mud Vision,' and it displays a synaesthetic vocabulary of the religious, the palpable and the recondite. The poem, in all its artistic brilliance and hermeneutic possibilities, can also be seen as a metaphor for language: 'The Mud Room' presents a box for the arcane, the discarded and the half-forgotten and linguistically abstruse, and a small space for small narratives in the wake of Lyotard's dissipation of grand narratives – a post-structuralist box of trinkets. All its linguistic, metaphoric, melodious and prosodic bric-a-brac appears repeatedly in amended forms and new constellations to constitute new meanings like old bricks in new buildings. Very suitably, then, the muddled and the multifarious that spread throughout the volume reach its crescendo in the final poem. In a Muldoonesque manner established by all previous volumes, *Hay* ends on a longer tour de force in the final poem, this time with imbricated detour, corrigenda and errata. Points, plots and play occur, re-occur and correct themselves in 'The Bangle (Slight Return).' In this multigeneric text several disintegrating narratives intertwine in Muldoon's characteristic depleted sonnets to gesture towards alternative lines and lives in a process that concentrates conspicuously on its own creativity. The plot from Virgil's *Aeneid* coalesces with the persona's culinary night in Paris and an imaginative realisation of his father's aborted journey to Australia. In response to Kerrigan's mini-definition of the new narrative as 'relexive, aleatory and cornucopian' and a 'continuous

shadowing of what might be,' Muldoon's multirratives in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' tend to shadow what might *not* be as they obliterate themselves.[39]

> 'For "maxims",' Virgil again drew himself up, 'read "Maxime's."
> For 'flint' read 'skint.'
> The beauty of it is that your da and that other phantasm
> no more set foot in Queensland
>
> than the cat that got the cream
> might look at a king. That's the sheer beauty of it.
> Ne'er cast a clout, heigh, in mid-stream.
> No brilliant. No brilliantine, ho. No classifieds
>
> in *The Tyrone Courier*.
> No billabong. No billy-boil.
> No stately at the autoharp.
>
> No Mastercard. No mainferre. No slopes of Montparnasse. No spare
> the rod and spoil
> the horse lost for want, heigh ho, of enough rope.'
> [...]
> 'For "errata",' Virgil smiled, 'read "corrigenda".'
> He looked straight through me to Lysander and Hermia.
> 'For "Mathilda" read "Matilda."
>
> For "lass" read "less".
> Time nor tide wait for a wink
> from the aura
>
> of Ailsa Craig. For "Menalaus" read "Menelaus".
> For "dinkum" read "dink".
> For "Wooroonooran," my darlings, read "Wirra Wirra".' (139–140)

Thus the volume ends. And corrects itself. And returns to the past of the persona and his father, and to many previous poems in the volume. And beyond. Muldoon's final multirrative in *Hay* continues the possibilities of that which could have happened, the many future alternatives in the past that did not come into being but still bear upon the present situation – templates of

39 Kerrigan, 'The New Narrative,' 22.

thinking and rethinking recognisable from many of Muldoon's poems in the past, not least 'Immram' (WBL, 38–47) and 'Madoc' (*M*, 15–261). Many of these present Muldoonian alterratives: the contest of the alternatives that did not occur, the challenge of multiple narratives that vie for ascendancy, Plan Bs and the counter-hegemonic wild turns of language that provoke new interpretation. In its absorption of linguistic errata, in its dissolving multirratives, formal involutions and philosophical implications, 'The Bangle (Slight Return),' as 'The Point' and 'The Plot' and many others, reconfigure the minimalist matrices of Muldoon's aesthetics in general and the methods of his exemplar of parapostmodernist language, *Madoc*, in particular. Muldoonian alterratives, adlinguisticity and formal dissolutions inhere in his endless experimentation with the constituents of the poetic. Such narrathanotographic impulses to present lingual and formal experimentations that have not yet been articulated or formulated generate artistic creativity, and energise new cognitive processes in profound poetic and philosophical modes. *Hay* is another volume that exhibits the weird and relentlessly playful aspects of the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry.

CHAPTER 9

Moy Sand and Gravel

'Life is indeed no more than "a misprint / in the sentence of death".' Muldoon's memorable verses from 'Now, Now' in the previous volume *Hay* (23) anticipate and condense the concerns of precarious human existence and linguistic undecidability in *Moy Sand and Gravel.* The line also anticipates the status and signifiance of the term 'sentence' in this volume. The sentence, in all its senses of grammar, writing, structure and law, becomes a unit for attention and experimentation. This concentration on the sentence indicates a motion in Muldoon's poetry from the minutiae and deconstructive forces of language towards larger structures and more constructive tendencies. Yet Muldoon's preoccupation with language, which resulted in so much adlinguisticism, plot and play in *Hay*, remains. Many titles in his ninth volume of poetry from 2002 highlight his linguistic intensity, and continue to develop his characteristic scrutiny of language. 'Tell,' 'As,' 'On,' 'Famous First Words,' 'The Grand Conversation,' 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning' and 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' all draw attention to words, functions, concepts, ideas and signs of language. The first three poems enlarge on the importance of the minutiae of language – prepositions and single words – in a way both William Empson and Jacques Derrida would recognise.[1] Polysemantic equivocation interacts with larger ideas and corresponds with several shifting contexts in all

1 'I shall frequently pounce on the least interesting aspect of a poem,' Empson declares in the beginning of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (7). He continues: 'I shall now mount on the second of the hobby-horses with which I am ending off this chapter, and examine the way Shakespeare uses a combination of "and" and "of,"' before his extensive analysis on the meaning of the two words in Shakespeare's work (88–101). Derrida exploits "as" as a linguistic crow bar to open the can of deconstructive worms. In his philosophical shakedown with Lévi-Strauss on structural linguistics one of his paragraphs runs: 'If we wished to elaborate the question of the *model,* we would have to examine all the "as"-s and "likewise"-s that punctuate the argument, ordering and authorizing the analogy between phonology and sociology, between phonemes and the terms of kinship. "A striking analogy," we are told, but the functioning of its "as" shows us quickly enough that this is a very infallible but very impoverished generality of structural laws, no doubt governing the systems considered, but also dominating many other systems; a phonology exemplary as the example in a series and not as the regulative model. But on this terrain questions have been asked, objections articulated; and as the *epistemological* phonologism establishing a science as a master-model presupposes a *linguistic* and *metaphysical* phonologism that raises speech above writing, it is the last that I shall first try to identify.' See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 103. Derrida's *locus classicus* for exploding hermeneutic structures in Irish literature is his reading of Joyce, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear

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three poems, with an obvious accent on the writerly. 'Tell' bears resemblance to 'Crossing the Line' and 'The Plot' in its integration of undecidable linguistic connotations and shifting alliances between cultures in conflict. Festivity and formality dominate 'On' and 'As,' which focus on minimal and frequently ignored units of language, and incorporate a certain media self-consciousness. The former fourteen liner plays on stage production and audience sections. The latter, 'As,' Muldoon's 99-line millennium poem broadcast on RTÉ on 31 December 1999, Millennium Eve, plays on the adverb, conjunction and noun of multiple linguistic functions and meanings, activates the concept of the simile, and parallels the freewheeling associations of the last twenty-two 'of'-stanzas in 'Incantata' (*AC*, 21–28). The radio poem records the sparkling sounds of metric intoxication, linguistic relish and historical changes in a poem of pyrotechnic splendour that displays the mesmerising brilliance of Muldoon's poetic insouciance: a count-down of Muldoonia and of the linguistic century. 'Famous First Words,' a series of alphabetic conundrums and in many ways an abecedarian mini-Madoc, a poetic sibling of 'Errata' (*H*, 88), presents thirteen couplets of enigmatic riddles that necessitate excursions in a plethora of encyclopaedias and reference works. Two poems on pomegranates, 'Paul Valéry: Pomegranates' and 'Pineapples and Pomegranates,' displace, first, their own allusions to hand grenades, then, second, reference to their own meaning. In two sentences of poetry and politics, 'Guns and Butter' questions the censuring of radical and explosive poetics from paramilitary camps. 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning' offers a catachrestic mini-terrorist narrative in a single sentence. 'The Grand Conversation' balances larger contexts and individual matters. The final poem, as always, orchestrates the volume's sounds and zest, words and weirdness, signs and semiosis, as the title clearly demonstrates: 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999.' Some of these poems take new turns on old territory, some of them break new ground; some of them are cerebral and cold, some of them compassionate and caring – all of them centre on thoughts, definitions, ideas and concepts of language, and all of them excavate the spaces of language between sign and referentiality, between signs and metaphysics. And the spaces of language itself.

Muldoon's language consciousness, which so many of the titles highlight, manifests itself from A to Z in this volume, in form, feature, line, lexicon, sound and structure as much as in the unexpected, unseen and unheard features of the volume. Numerological solutions and stanzaic versatility configure temporal frames and prevalent themes. Neologisms, lexical rarities, Gaelic and other

Say Yes in Joyce,' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 253–310.

languages, linguistic errancy, popular idiom and the weird and the wonderful words of a poet who confesses his love for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and who devotes a whole book chapter to 'the urge towards the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible' still enhance the diversity of Muldoon's poetic language.[2] His zest for rhythm, inimitable chime and cognitive convocations is consolidated here. This time he combines the Gaelic 'mar bheadh' with 'orchestra' (43); 'the smell, like a skunk' with 'Thelonious Monk' (51); and 'Ashkenaz' with 'Mouth and Nose,' 'Auschwitz' and 'Boscobel Beach' (82). In the title poem 'taken aback' and 'travel' yield composite rhymes: 'track' and 'smackety-smack' (8). In 'The Misfits' the names and sounds of 'Grew,' 'Grimley,' 'Monk,' and 'Moy' are melded together in 'Montgomery' (10). The horse play on studs and stallions in 'The Whinny' prescribes their movement with the prepuce / of his yard / an unprepossessing puce' (13). In a similar type of double act in 'Winter Wheat' (26), 'something' appears twenty times as a short cut solution for all the unpresentable dimensions of the seedy, and of conception and long gestation in rural relations and intertextual exchange. The multisemiotics of S — from 'Yarrow' (*AC*, 39–189) resurfaces in 'The Otter' (30). The endeavour to exhaust the polysemantics of the homonym, epitomised by 'They that Wash on Thursday' in *Hay* (83–84), continues in 'One Last Draw of the Pipe' (21) in the context of smoke signals between Paul Muldoon, W.B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde and Sitting Bull – certainly a series of coded messages for initiates, and possibly from Muldoon to a lot of non-smokers. In the final long finish, which in this volume is cut back to a more manageable size, 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' internal stanzaic chimes extend to a sound distribution in which the first and the final, the second and the penultimate, the third and the triultimate octave chime with each other in continuous introversion. Despite the many syncopations and mud slides, a startling amount of phonetic combinations in this volume sound with the hammer and tongs of a master wordsmith, as if to revert to basics in line with the signals of the title, *Moy Sand and Gravel*. The connectivity and rhythms that rarely fail to please or provoke are coupled with formal twists in which the master of the mutable sonnet, and of alterratives, sestina variations and composite forms, splices haiku with terza rima in 'News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm,' spins a one-sentence sestina in 'The Turn,' and recalibrates remarkable refrains in 'The Loaf,' 'An Old Pit Pony' and 'Homesickness.'

The linguistic novelties established and exploited in previous volumes continue. *Moy Sand and Gravel* articulates, in tandem with his Clarendon lectures from 2000, *To Ireland, I*, a return to originary processes of location, elements

2 AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 14; Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 5.

and identity, as the naming of the author's home country and region in both titles indicate. They return, in this respect, with alternative views and reorientations to the dilemmas of expatriation in *Why Brownlee Left*, and to the directions towards other places and other times in *Madoc* and *The Annals of Chile*. They also signal strongly the devotion to Irish matters that, in Muldoon's poetry, cannot be extrapolated from his international interests, and his explorations of aesthetics and larger matters, for example nation and subjectivity. Rather than searching for the right language in which to articulate such concerns and ideas, Muldoon's explorations of language challenge and change such concerns and ideas. As Edna Longley testifies: 'Muldoon often quotes Yeats's reply when asked where he got his ideas from: "looking for the next rhyme."'[3] Muldoon's poetic drive frequently leads to the dissemination and deferral of concerns, concepts and ideas in order to uncover the coordinates of similarity and difference that produce and project their coming into being. Increasingly, new sound correspondences for conventional rhymes, scepticism towards linguistic assumptions and distrust of grand philosophical schemes shimmer with creativity in chronology and connectivity to germinate alterratives to dominant concepts of, for example, origins and selfsameness. Muldoon's alterratives of corrosive critique, aporetic accountability, transformative identifications and imaginative forays into what might have been and what might be, continue in this volume. His narrathanographic drives subside. *Moy Sand and Gravel*'s dedication 'for Dorothy and Asher,' Muldoon's children, suggests a continuation of the vital verses in *The Annals of Chile* and the domestic scenes in *Hay* more than the commemorative and ancestral spirit of large parts of his poetry up to *Madoc*. The correspondences between *Moy Sand and Gravel* and *To Ireland, I* also include, as the latter title signals so crisply, Muldoon's preoccupation with the sentence at this time.

In response to this volume, as to *Hay*, most critics now notice the inveterate linguistic hyper-self-consciousness of Muldoon's poetry. Laura Quinney starts her review with a paragraph on the language of the volume and Mallory Jensen comments that 'the poems are full of oblique references and hard-to-pronounce Irish words.'[4] The reviewer in *The Economist* argues that 'Mr. Muldoon may be a conspiracy theorist of language – all rhymers are.'[5] Edna Longley

3 Edna Longley, 'Twists and Turns: Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' *Poetry Review* 92, no. 4 (2003), 64.

4 Laura Quinney, 'In the Studebaker. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' *London Review of Books*, 23 October 2003, 20–21; Mallory Jensen, 'Unraveling Poems of a Modern Irish Bard. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' *Columbia Spectator*, 21 October 2002.

5 AA, 'Reasons for Rhyme,' *The Economist*, 6 February 2003, http://www.economist.com/node/1563685, accessed 10 January 2019.

writes on Muldoon's' inhabitation of 'that unsettling between-place' between 'word and thing.' She continues: 'If, at one level, Muldoon's poetry constitutes a radical linguistic politics, it is because he continuously implies the norms from which his structures deviate or which they criticise.'[6] Sean O'Brien, in tandem with Jonathan Allison's ground-breaking article on modality and auxiliary in Muldoon's poetry, draws attention to his enigmatic use of verbal tense, and writes with crystal-clear intellect on the significance of language, from and content:

> Yet at the same time the dominant formal feature, rhyme, in which Muldoon is spectacularly ingenious is itself his imagination's leading agent, able to enforce, underline, undermine, contradict, echo, beguile and mislead apparently at will. This copious formality ensures that we never feel a separation of realms between aspects of Muldoon's subject matter. Love, time, parenthood and politics are all part of the same enterprise.[7]

Tom Payne's observation runs parallel to Muldoon's own admission that he looks for the next rhyme: 'Because he makes such demands of words, they end up leading him into strange places.' He also opens up for the possibility that Muldoon is 'a rare poet who stays in virtuosic mode while discussing something grave.'[8] Ian Sansom, in a hilarious review as sassy and jazzy in spirit as some sprite segments of Muldoon himself, thinks that *Moy Sand and Gravel* reads like 'the work of the impressionist Pound if he'd lived in New Hampshire, kept chickens, had sausage-sized fingers and taken to writing poems about roads not taken.' He finds 'the usual lexicographical enthusiasms and oddities in the new book, and wordplay, and puns, and mysteries, and narrative confusion, and squash-ball sentences, and lyrics, and mini-epics, caracols, buffets, haiku, sonnets, Heraclitean flux, shape-shifters, terrorists, "characters" with crazy names, fabulous car journeys, and much praise for America and Armagh. And Moy, of course.' He, like most critics, elevates 'Cradle Song for Asher' as the pinnacle of poignant poetry in the volume with parental frankness and artistic candour: 'All I know is that there's not a parent who wouldn't wish they had thought the thought, or a poet who wouldn't wish they'd written it.' He states of

6 Longley, 'Twists and Turns: Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 65.

7 Sean O'Brien, 'Memories Are Made of This. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Sunday Times*, 26 January 2003, 48; Allison, '"Everything Provisional". Fictive Possibility and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson.'

8 Tom Payne, 'Four Ostriches and an Orange. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' *The Telegraph*, 9 November 2002, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4729277/Four-ostriches-and-an-orange.html, accessed 5 January 2019.

the volume: 'Muldoon may be in love with the possibilities of language; *Moy Sand and Gravel* demonstrates that he is also a poet in love with the possibilities life.'[9] Robert Macfarlane notes the volume's rhyme and language, and commends the seriousness: 'Muldoon's books, indeed, can often seem like rehab centres for language … Decryption is a word that catches the prevailing mood of *Moy Sand and Gravel*, suggesting as it does both a decoding and a concern for the dead.'[10] Macfarlane sees a clear connection between the volume's language and its radical significance. He notes how the poetry shows a 'deep mistrust of dogma' and 'profound antipathy to the doctrinaire,' and 'has made both an ethics and a poetics out of incertitude,' and retains a 'vital dimension of ethical seriousness.'[11]

Most reviewers explain how Muldoon's perpetual language engagement enacts seriousness and ethical depth. These reviews do not share Elmer Kennedy-Andrews doubt about 'how seriously we should take anything Muldoon says,' or his question about 'to what extent is he merely a highly inventive but emotionally evasive joker playing a slippery, virtuosic game of words and rhymes and allusions?'[12] Astonishingly, many of the same reviewers, in spite of their astute critique, fail to see the novelty in Muldoon's language in *Moy Sand and Gravel*. Sansom states 'There is really nothing new here' and Quinney announces that 'the poems in *Moy Sand and Gravel* don't differ in kind from his previous work.' Bill Raglie argues that 'it still seems more of an extension of *Hay* than a distinctly new step.'[13] Sure, Muldoon hones his linguistic edge, but these critics fail to see new orientations in Muldoon's ways with language.

Muldoon's investigations of the sentence are the fulcrum of this volume, which follows a more constructive than deconstructive direction. The linguistic shift to concentrated interest in sentence and syntax from previous immersions in lexicon, grammar, plots and play is very noticeable. In *Moy Sand and Gravel* the sentence appears as the linguistic unit against which other matters of language and content are balanced. This pivotal point in his poetry at the turn of the millennia appears as random and arbitrary as so many other

9 Ian Sansom, 'Awesome in Armagh. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Guardian*, 2 November 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/profile/iansansom?page=8, accessed 5 January 2019.

10 Robert Macfarlane, 'High and Dry in the Flood. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 2002, 24.

11 Ibid.

12 Kennedy-Andrews, 'Introducing Paul Muldoon: "Arbitrary and Contrary",' 5, 17.

13 Bill Ragalie, 'Paul Muldoon's Latest: A Master Poet Writ(H)Es Again,' *The Mac Weekly* 95, no. 6 (2002), http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/101802/arts3.html, accessed 24 February 2019.

linguistic pin points, and as powerful, but a turn towards the sentence unit and the more constructive powers of language composition makes sense in the wake of the deconstructive excesses in *Madoc* and *Hay*. Sentences, like letters, words, points, plots, play and other Muldonic semiotics, assume alternative orders, multiple analogies and metaphoric multiplicity way beyond their syntactic functions. *To Ireland, I*, for example, displays in title, design and analysis the peripatetic and paratactic features of Muldoon's canonical recontextualisations from the Oxford pulpit, and demonstrates how Muldoon's crossings of linguistic and literary lines, geographical boundaries and identifications of self are characterised by linguistic leaps and associative alacrity more than canonical kowtowing, narratological conventionality and identitarian politics of nationality and selfhood. This title also shines with the importance of alphabetic singularity in Muldoon's audiovisual imagination and semiotic method, and it glistens with the processes of becoming: the subject, 'I,' is phonetically and visually inscribed at the inception of the nation, 'Ireland,' and, conversely, separated as a distinctive entity in a double-spaced position inside and outside the margins of collectivity and nationality: 'Ireland, I.' The placing of the preposition first in the sentence stresses movement: 'To Ireland, I.' The conspicuous omission of verb radiates unusual syntax and adds urgency to motion. Probably, the sentence highlights Gaelic syntax in the English language. Certainly, Muldoon's title acquires clarity in correspondence with Yeats's famous declaration in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree:' 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,' and with Joyce's statement that the 'the shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead.' As a poetic parallel, *Moy Sand and Gravel* proposes a route to the poet's mother country, more specifically the rural region of his childhood and adolescence: Moy. Sand and gravel evoke elements of the earth as natural to the Moy, Armagh and Ireland as to Morocco, Arabia and Israel, geographical specifications that are all significant to the permutations and gravity of the volume; to its many alterratives. Sand and gravel, significantly, just like hay, suggest man-handled products as much as natural elements. They also constitute the primary elements in construction, and thus include in their allusiveness Muldoon's commitment to the creation of the best sentence.

Semi-self-referential verses in *Moy Sand and Gravel* affirm the attention to the sentence and present the potential emancipatory artistic powers of syntactic incarceration:

> I was so long a prisoner
> that, though I now am free,
> the thought that I serve some sentence
> is so ingrained in me

> that I still wait for a warder
> to come and turn the key. (65)

These verses, a single sentence in 'Two Stabs at Oscar,' which meditate upon the fate and literature of Oscar Wilde, capture a claustrophobic sense of incarceration in the human condition alongside the religious miasma of eternal sin. The six-line sentence, however, also confesses to the inescapable importance of syntax to a language-conscious poet. The sentence presents a new segment of language which Muldoon subjects to inspection and attempts to liberate. This new orientation in Muldoon's poetry parallels his prolonged endeavour to liberate himself from the traditional mould of poetic forms – sonnets, sestinas, haikus, villanelles, narratives. It also complements the prolonged resistance to conventional ideas and forms, and to the functions phenomena of language that he has so far conducted throughout his career. Such anti-establishment animus appears as radical and aporetic as any deconstructive drive to critique Western metaphysics in a language that is predicated upon the very ideas it seeks to criticise. Muldoon's engagement with language implies larger contexts of change and consequence beyond the poem and the page. They are directed towards a future beyond the closure of the present. The imaginative quest for the articulation of unknown futures requires types of language and poetry that are in continuous motion towards the creative and the new. The established tends to confirm the status quo. Edna Longley is less convinced in her review, but points out the same potential in Muldoon's 'radical linguistic politics' 'because he continuously implies the norms from which his structures deviate or which they criticise.'[14] Adlinguistically, the sentence in 'Two Stabs at Oscar' echoes uncannily Fredric Jameson's critical survey of structuralism in *The Prison House of Language*. It also, in its final word, refers directly to 'The Key' in *Madoc*, as a reminder of how Muldoon's poetry often sets new keys more then it offers the correct answers or the appropriate tools to solve a mystery. In the wider context of intratextuality and broad poetic preoccupations, this particular stanza forms a dialogue with 'Crossing the Line' (MTB, 17). The relations between the two, the sentence and the line, are as symbiotic and shifting as they are symbolic and supplementary. The sentence assumes priority in *Moy Sand and Gravel.*

The sentence is of key importance to language in its structuring of words, thought, syntax and grammar. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, one of or perhaps

14 Longley, 'Twists and Turns: Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 65.

the source of language and poetic inspiration that Muldoon praises ecstatically,[15] gives the following definition:

> A series of words in connected speech or writing, forming the grammatically complete expression of a single thought; in popular use often such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another. In *Grammar*, the verbal expression of a proposition, question, command, or request, containing normally a subject and a predicate (though either of these may be omitted by ellipsis).[16]

Muldoon explores and experiments with the concept of sentence throughout *Moy Sand and Gravel*. Scrutiny of the sentence involves entangled issues such as the balance between logic and language, thought and expression, and between line and sentence. Scrutiny of the sentence also involves such intricacies as word order, start, length, rhythm and prosody of the separate linguistic unit, and, of course, how the particular sentence relates to the preceding and succeeding sentences. Sentence construction becomes the main element in the poetic edifice of the volume. This attention to units of language and meaning beyond letters and words, plots and play, extends his incessant interest in language and gives the volume a more complete and coherent sense and structure. The sentence, nevertheless, serves a number of other symbolic purposes, as the stanza from 'Two Stabs at Oscar' illustrates so lambently. Its religious connotations can be traced at least to Peter Lombard's classic of mediaeval theology, *The Four Books of Sentences* (*Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*). Manifold understandings of the term as pointed saying, opinion, maxim, aphorism and apophthegm go further back. Derivatives, such as sententious and sententiousness, augment the term's meanings. Today the term 'sentence' also appears frequently in the general terminology of jurisdiction and punishment, as it does in the poetic realm, with specific reference to the literature and life of Wilde in the particular case of 'Two Stabs at Oscar.' These connotations of jurisdiction in the word 'sentence' also extend to Heaney's engagement with questions of justice in many of his poems, for example, 'Punishment' and 'Casualty,' and in many of his essays. In its understanding of structure and completion, sentence, in its many definitions, forms and functions, just like the various consistencies

15 Muldoon rejoices: 'My wife has just bought me the 13-volume *OED* as a present: I just love it. But I have little command of and facility in language. I'm constantly having to slow things down and examine what things mean.' AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 14.

16 *The Oxford English* Dictionary, http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=sentence&_searchBtn=Search, accessed 17 April 2019.

and mutabilities of sand and gravel, introduces a sense that construction tends to take priority over deconstruction in Muldoon's poetry from *Moy Sand and Gravel*.

The many implications of sentence – moral, existential, philosophical, linguistic – rest firmly on the syntactic traverses of the entire volume. Twelve of the forty-five poems in the volume unfold along a single sentence. 'Moy Sand and Gravel,' 'The Braggart,' 'Beagles,' 'Whitethorns,' 'The Otter,' 'John Luke: *The Fox*,' 'Anthony Green: *The Second Marriage*,' 'Eugenio Montale: *The Eel*,' 'The Breather,' 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning,' 'The Turn' and 'Cradle Song for Asher' range from four to thirty-six lines, and are contained in a single sentence quatrain, double sestets, sonnets or sestina. An even larger number of stanzas follows suit. Frequently, the sentence stretches across lines and stanzas. More often than not, the sentence stops in odd places; in the middle of the line, in the middle of the stanza. Rarely, the sentence coincides with the line. The sentence becomes another unit of poetic construction that forms dynamics of opposition to and cooperation with the line. How to deliver a sentence supplements the perennial poetic problem of how to turn the line. Muldoon has always been very aware of how the etymology and the tradition of the line comes from Latin *versus*, a term which stems from the ploughman turning the furrows as much as how a poet turns a line of poetry, or a term that means confrontation: against.The start, length and finish, the prosody, enjambment and volta, and the form and feature of genre and stanza shine forth in the variety of verses already on display in his debut collection *New Weather*. 'Blemish' in *Mules* presents the first one-sentence poem. 'Crossing the Line' (MTB, 17) epitomises Muldoon's consciousness of the complexities of the sentence. How a sentence hosts the lines (and stanzas), how it provides a longer syntactic measure for many of the same established poetic features, and how the sentence gains in wider symbolic significance, presents a new creative chamber in the language of Muldoon's poetry. Sentences of all kinds occur. Unsurprisingly, he explores most sentences that are less travelled and he tends to resist conventional structure and order.

At least half of the poems start with subordinate clauses in an inversion of the ordinate and the dominant of sentence structure. Conditional, temporal and comparative clause types, frequently infinite, incite modes of uncertain alternatives, different temporalities and double dimensions with a sense of open-endedness and infinitude. One-sentence poems that start with a main clause often function as a balloon, an expansive framework for how much you can put into it before it bursts, which in Muldoon's case it does not. Other main clause poems can be of interrogative and dialogic kind, as in 'A Collegeland Catechism' and 'The Grand Conversation.' Imperative sentences tend to appear only in 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' as a sentential

oddity with strong syntactic symbolism of totalitarian control. Sentences come in almost all shapes and forms of the syntactic system. They are all different. They all exude premeditation. They also, however, mark a noticeable shift towards cogency, coherence and synthesis. Muldoon's attention to sentence over line, phrase and smaller syntactic units, not to mention alphabetic atomism and lexical mining, shifts emphasis towards construction in his poetic career. The linguistic framework Muldoon has imposed upon his own art, the sentence, also adds energy to his own creativity. His concentration on the sentence requires readers to sharpen their interpretational acuity. His profound scrutiny of sentence and syntax also holds radical implications for underlying structures in other artistic, social and political contexts. In addition to these general observations, each specific sentence, curve and coil serve their own points and purposes within the singular poem.

Many of the Muldonic language poems in *Moy Sand and Gravel* – 'Tell,' 'As,' 'On,' 'Famous First Words,' 'The Grand Conversation,' 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning,' 'At the Sign of the Black horse, September 1999' – radiate the importance and position of language. Other poems in the volume with less linguistically effervescent titles sometimes prove even more novel in Muldoon's 'look for the next rhyme.' His novelty also shows in his search for the next alphabetic trick, in his hunt for the next lexical beast and, particularly in this volume, in his drive for the new syntactic turn. 'Hard Drive,' a scathing and humorous multi-clichéd sonnet on the cultivation of grievance in many camps, 'keeping that wound green' (3), forefronts in the first poem the linguistic innovation upon which thematic concerns are predicated. The evident lexical and formal assurance in this exquisite three-sentence sonnet indicates the volume's metatextual meditations. A round trip in Northern Ireland, especially its borderlands, presents with love and joy and phonetic relish a number of places: 'Seskinore,' 'Belleek and Bellanaleck,' 'Derryfubble and Dunnamanagh and Ballynascreen' – a gazette of geographic precision and palatal linguistics. Heaney's *dinnseanchas*, place-name poems, lurk in the hinterland, as do Muldoon's own contentious poems in this genre. Sean O'Brien acknowledges the poem's far-reaching political implications: '"Hard Drive" is surely "political" in its concern for what happens to language in the mouths of political sects seeking to perpetuate grievance.'[17] This unconventional opening sonnet certainly administers a strong antidote to the pestilence of festering political grievance. The catalogue of clichés suggests how reproduction of dead language abets the harbouring of old wounds, prolongs traumatic memory and hampers renewal by foreclosing resolution in the repetition of formulaic and outdated rhetoric.

17 O'Brien, 'Memories Are Made of This. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' 48.

A concern for clichés and dead language and how they work and why, is surely of pressing interest and relevance. These verses are indicative of the lexical boreens, the poetic byways, cultural back roads and digital highways with which the book engages. Recourse to well-grounded lines of language keeps conventional trains of thought on track and facile rhymes (at least in Muldoon's repertoire) direct easy combinations and unproblematic fusions. Facile and outmoded, the clichés also capture inflexible retrospection and they create a counterpoint for the subsequent linguistic innovation and refraction of established views of the past in numerous succeeding poems. Self-consciously, the verses play on the difficulties of poetic composition and, contextually, on the problems of codes and communication, and on the sending of messages to the right addresses. One such addressee is the pool of car and drive poems, well steered by Heaney.[18] Another is Muldoon's own poetry.[19] Where annals and TV-channel switching suggest organising templates to *The Annals of Chile* and 'Yarrow,' 'Hard Drive' indicates the PC as a metaphor of memory and semantic processing. In this context, the clichés occur as macros in a programmed language to reveal their rigidities and possibilities, a parallel and provocation to the limits and liberties of poetry. The PC, the technical revolution of our era, one of the paradigms of postmodernism and the ultimate system of binary codes, reigns as a medium and (for some) a menace to the arts in a new millennium. The three sentences in this poem, which run across lines, quatrains and couplets, can be seen as a numerological overriding of these implied binaries, and one can discern, in their careful construction, an affirmation of the importance of the sentence in this volume. Their subordinate structure indicates general intent to reverse ordinary order, and introduces the sentence as a new arena for Muldoon's fascination and experimentation with language. In *Moy Sand and Gravel* Muldoon resists and crosses the structures of the digital medium with creativity and circumspection. 'Hard Drive' signals strongly in the first poem that the routes and rotes of poetry constitute one of the main roads down which this volume travels.

A number of poems takes the implications of 'Hard Drive' in different directions. 'Unapproved Road,' the next poem, connects with 'Hard Drive' in troubling road imagery and by exploring many of the initial poem's implications. Originally commissioned for Logue's *The Border* (2000), the poem takes its title

18 For a critical survey of Heaney's car imagery, see Medbh McGuckian, *Horsepower Pass By! A Study of the Car in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. University of Ulster (Coleraine: Cranagh Press, 1999).

19 Some of Muldoon's car and drive poems are 'Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward' (*NW*, 23), 'Ireland' (*WBL*, 19), 'The Sightseers' (*Q*, 15), 'The Windshield' (*Mag*, 34), 'Wayside Shrines' (*Mag*, 110–120).

directly from the official term for the many blockaded roads and destroyed bridges preventing unauthorised border crossings between Northern Ireland and the Republic during the conflict.[20] The title's associations extend further and the poem couples Republican and Arabic issues at a time when xenophobia contemporaneously challenged the tradition, culture and mindset of Northern/Ireland, America and elsewhere. In a separate intervention, Muldoon has stated that he is 'very suspicious of a worldview where we equal our passports.' He also admits to fleeting national attachments: 'I've had a UK passport along the way too…but my primary affiliation is with Ireland, where I lived for the first 35 years.'[21] These border poetics take place in a poem that negotiates language, sentence, sestina and terza rima, revisits Muldoon's own border land poems, not least 'Cows' (*AC*, 33), and interacts with the many frontiers of Heaney's poetics, especially from *The Haw Lantern.* The poem also presents a conjunction of the many sentences – interrogative, complex and dialogic more than simple, declarative and imperative – that are later brought into singular focus. Perhaps the lithe one-sentence 'Eugenio Montale: *The Eel*,' which writhes in the sea of translations and the eel currents between Heaney and Muldoon, captures most suitably in image and syntax the challenge of turning the sentence.[22] A reading of some of the other poems illustrates the significance of the sentence in this single poem, and hints at its many hermeneutic possibilities in others.

'The Turn,' a Muldoonesque sestina, reverts to and diverts from familiar Muldoonian terrain in theme and technique. Muldoon's evocative and wonderful meditation upon the changes and continuities of life are presented in a persona's convoluted retrospection upon the imagination and reality of his life. This journey unfolds as a camel ride across the shifting sands of deserted lands. A very suitable ergative syntax stresses shifting moods and transitions.

20 Paddy Logue, ed. *The Border: Personal Reflections from Ireland, North and South* (Corcoran, California: Oak Tree, 2000).

21 Kilroy, 'Transatlantic Poet. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 7. Famously, Heaney, who was known to have declined sponsorship from the British Council, protested against being included in Morrison and Motion's *Contemporary British Poetry*, and brandished his Irish passport in 'An Open Letter.'

22 Slippery eels suggest a very lithe metaphor for sentence. For eels in the interpoeticality and semiotic seas between Muldoon and Heaney, see Heaney's 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' in *Door into the Dark* (26–33); 'Widgeon: for Paul Muldoon' in *Station Island* (48); 'Settings xvii' in *Seeing Things* (73) and 'Eelworks' in *Human Chain* (28–32). Muldoon attends to eels and Heaney's poetry, in 'The Briefcase' in *Madoc* (12), 'Eugenio Montale: *The Eel*' (*MSG*, 58). Fran Brearton states that 'those Lough Neagh eels have had as many critical lives as a cat.' Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents,' 50.

Two temporal clauses capture from the very start convolutions of time, family contentions and the confluence of fiction and fact:

> In those days when the sands
> might shift at any moment, when his mother might at any moment lay
> into him, he thought nothing of getting up half-way
> through a story about the Sahara, (69)

'The Turn' is another *tour-de-force* in Muldoon's repertoire of syntactic sprezzatura and memorable pathos that goes on with turns and returns, from the past to the present, through recurring memories of the individual in the larger circles of human devastation and desolation, to the final denouement in the envoi:

> back through the sands
>
> on which lay the bones of thousands
> of his countrymen, through the sand-pile that was not at
> all reminiscent of the Sahara,
> having him turn back inside to pick up his own sentence,
> to hear himself out. (70)

The title, 'The Turn,' places the poem amidst a plethora of associations and self-reflexive linguistic signpostings. For all its associations of rotation, twist, change, deflection, curves and bends, 'The Turn' also points directly to its own syntactic composition and poetic creation. Muldoon's one-sentence sestina offers an observable turn in the tradition of the thirty-nine-line format. To continue a single sentence in thirty-nine lines and to incorporate thirty-nine lines in a single sentence, make a change in creative challenge for the master of contemporary sonnet de/construction. The reader and critic will have to bend her mind, too. The thirty-nine line one-sentence sestina engenders its own turning of lines, stanzas and chimes in a virtuoso display of sustained connectivity. Its creativity within the confines of a strict genre structure turns out to be a self-fulfilled prophecy of the introvert confession in the earlier poem 'Two Stabs at Oscar:' 'I serve some sentence' (65). Its melancholic vivaciousness and expansive temporal vistas tend to commute the short moment and severe sentence of judgement in 'Now, Now:' 'Life is indeed no more than "a misprint in the sentence of death"' (*H*, 23). Its sense of extension, construction and synthesis departs from the stops, leaps and lacunae in 'Crossing the Line' (MTB, 17).

The carefully constructed verses in the beginning continue throughout the thirty-nine lines and seven stanzas to compose in a single sentence a unity of past and present, of family and of experiences in literature and life. Transmutations of words and chimes combine with the ergative syntax to emphasise change and continuity: 'Sahara' and 'Saahaara,' 'scent' and 'sentence,' 'twists and turns,' 'ergs and regs' (69–70). Rotation of rhymes stresses the sense of remembrance, repetition and reorganisation. As a biography of a boy and a young adult's imaginative life, the poem's reminiscences divert from historical facts to imaginative, and an imaginative experience that ranges from A.E.W. Mason's adventure novel *The Four Feathers* (on loyalty and love in the Mahdist war in Africa just before the turn of the 20th century) into a large playground of Muldonic intratextuality in its many direct references to 'Ned Skinner' in *Mules*, and to his many previous mother poems in its mixture of childhood adventure and maternal admonitions, and countless indirect ones to *Madoc* ('Saahaara, 'Saahaara` and expedition in unknown territory), 'Quoof' (a love-making couple in an unidentifiable 'hotel room') and to this volume's 'Unapproved Road' (in desert landscape and camel riding) – to mention just some intratextual parallels. There are few limitations to the many sifts and shifts between this poem and the numerous other poems in Muldoon's artscape, whether by theme, content, form, line or sentence. To the extent that these all lie in the past, just like the persona's memories, a complex usage of verb tense integrates forcefully the past with the present. The use of the third person pronoun, relatively rare in this self-revelatory type of poetry, creates a definite distance to everything that is referred in the poem. The number of lines, 39, in view of Muldoon's general attention to numerology and especially in view of the significance of the 45 stanzas and the year 1999 in the final poem, also creates some distance as the number points to the drastic changes in 1939. Thus, a temporal vacillation between the personal and immediate and the historical and distant parallels the unusual presentation of what appears private and personal by a third person persona. 'The Turn' emphasises in title and form both drastic changes and iterations in life. Its syntax also directs in form and language new tendencies towards flexibility, cohesion and construction in Muldoon's own poetry, which previously often tended towards disjunctions, abruptions, impasses. 'The Turn' shows how Muldoon's preoccupation with the sentence reveals another side of his poetry, as well as another glimpse into the mysteries of how past memories bear upon present life.

That premeditated choice and inspection of a specific sentence structure gives life and form to a whole poem, is clearly seen in 'A Collegeland Catechism.' Muldoon's concentration on sentence, in all its syntactic functions,

turns and relevant analogies, creates the poem, articulates its themes and content, and enters into a dialogue with religious, poetic and political discourses. In 'A Collegeland Catechism' interrogative sentences develop in significance from syntax to serioludic questioning and critique of religious dogma and philosophical hegemony.

Which is known as the 'Orchard County'?
Which as the 'Garden State'?
Which captain of the *Bounty*
was set adrift by his mate?

Who cooked and ate an omelette
midway across Niagara falls?
Where did Setanta get
those magical hurley balls

he ram-stammed down the throat
of the blacksmith's hound?
Why would a Greek philosopher of note
refuse to be bound

by convention but live in a tub
from which he might overhear,
as he went to rub
an apple on his sleeve, the mutineers

plotting to seize the *Maid of the Mist*
while it was still half-able to forge
ahead and make half a fist
of crossing the Niagara gorge,

the tub in which he might light a stove
and fold the beaten
eggs into themselves? Who unearthed the egg-trove?
And who, having eaten

the omelette, would marvel at how the Mounties
had so quickly closed in on him, late
of the 'Orchard County'
by way of the 'Garden State'? (15–16)

'A Collegeland Catechism,' by taking the interrogative sentence as its point of departure, belongs to the catalogue of Muldonic language poems that stay in the memory and develop their hermeneutic plenitude from a specific language phenomenon, such as lexical scritiny in 'Bang' (*M*, 50), neologism in 'Quoof' (*Q*, 17), line in 'Crossing the Line' (MTB, 17), acrostics in 'Capercaillies' (*Mad*, 6), narrativity in 'The Plot' (*H*, 15), homonymy in 'They that Wash on Thursday' (*H*, 52), manuscript corrections in 'Errata' (*H*, 88), different sign systems in 'Rune' (*H*, 96), language puzzles in 'Riddle' (*HL*, 76), digital signs in '@' (*Mag*, 74), all his abecedarian poems and all the language poem in this volume. Experiments in rhyme drive all these poems. They appear like letters in a word, words in a clause and clauses in a sentence in Muldoon's continuous examination and critique of the underlying structures and the larger systems of language, such as post-structuralist philosophy in *Madoc* and sentence in *Moy Sand and Gravel*. This poem reads as a primer in wh-questions and a study in clause and sentence structure. All the interrogative sentences represent a universal quest for knowledge and understanding that ranges from childlike curiosity and trivial pursuit to religious quandary and philosophical inquiry. A pedagogic progression in level of difficulty characterises the questions. Accessible and intellectual humour, cross-continental exchanges of history and culture and destabilising inquisitions characterise these verses, which, at least by Muldoon's own standards, verge on deliberate doggerels, and unsettle certainties. The answers to Muldoon's recusant gallimaufry of popular and erudite questions from childhood, academic circles and religious precincts generate further conundrums. Armagh, New Jersey and Captain Bligh, the likely answers to the first three questions, implicate autobibliographical scrutiny in a mutinous crossing of continents, denominations and cultural categories. Another correct answer is the nineteenth century Niagara funambulist, Jean François Gravelet, whose artistry and Western contortions balance aesthetic avoirdupois and individual courage. 'Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini,' Muldoon explains with his characteristic zeal for enthralling tropes of poetry.[23] This assertion of liberation from formal constraints – whether genre, stanza, line or sentence – defines precisely one aspect of the poet's self-evaluation of the mental processes of creation. Gravelet lucidly depicts the challenges of walking upon a self-constructed sentence and upon all the lines in sentence, stanza, canon and contexts. This image of the poetic artist offers a subliminal gloss on 'Crossing the Line' (MTB, 17), the intratextual reference to this volume's many single sentence poems. Jokes on a poet's position in poetry and on the policies of publishers and universities

23 Kilroy, 'Transatlantic Poet. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 7.

are in the balance too, just as the cost of religious doctrines, political rhetoric and historical conflict resonate in the bottom line and final sentence.

Born in Saint Omer, the Catholic stronghold in Northern France, Gravelet, a.k.a. Charles Blondin, 'The Little Wonder,' 'The Prince of Manila,' performed at Niagara Falls and the Crystal Palace, toured England and the continent, gave his last performance in Belfast and died peacefully in retirement in London. In 1859–60 the French daredevil mesmerised the attending crowds and provoked the nature purists by his artistry in crossing on a tightrope the Niagara Falls on several occasions, each time with a new trick: blindfolded, on stilts with a wheel barrow, with his agent Aeneas-like on his shoulders – once he made an omelette midway. He caused public commotion and uproar, and several times had to endure public demands for his arrest. Gravelet's performance points to acts of prosody, to the sure-footed tricks of line-dancing and to the elevated, risky, controversial and earthbound position of a poet; a very suitable aerialist parallel to the well poised quips, queries and quests of 'A Collegelands Catechism,' and to the unapproved foci of *Moy Sand and Gravel*. Gravelet presents a figure of artistic altitude, linguistic equilibrium and crossings of all kinds that swerve with the risks and fanciful ideas of falls. His name, Gravelet, rhymes with the question's 'omelette,' as if the figure appears from or in response to a quest for sonic similitude: rhyme delivers reason. Gravelet, close to an anagrammatic pun on elevate, plays on the gravity of the solemn and the serious, and links up with the book's title and its intermittent diminution of the grand and the grave. Gravelet signifies without words and beyond mimesis. His irrational performances question logic and language in profound acts of humanity: only man would conduct such functionless artistry as line-balancing. Semi-irrational, speechless and gestural acts by an expatriate artist seem a striking parallel to a funambulist poet, i.e. Muldoon, who often balances the modernist modes of silence, exile and cunning with the postmodernist modes of language scepticism, marginality and reflexivity, and who tries to trace the relations between line and sentence in contexts beyond the poem.

Gravelet signifies ideological relativism and linguistic discursivity. More than representing abstract intellectualism removed from reality, or a signifying system totally detached from fundamental functions, he walks the tightrope of postmodernism: rapid movements back and forth upon temporary attachments to opposite precipices in a transient mastery of gravity and levity. Any static intellectual stance that fails to respond with agility to its climate and conditions – fundamentalisms of all categories – increases the risks of falling into abeyance, if it has not already done so. That such eventuality relinquishes the possibilities of propositions, logical assurance and referential affirmativeness does not discount the intellectual vitality of such apparently

unaccountable acts, or detract from their imaginative daring and significance. As a procursive and recursive equilibrist on a line, the funambulist illustrates the unstoppable processes of signifiance, the alignments of discourses and the temerity to act without identifiable points of origin. That such semiosis at times appears absurd, anarchic and morally condemnable does not deprive its elevated acrobatics of significance and social effect. Poets, thinkers, writers of the postmodern perform on a tightrope of spliced significance; the slightest stumble or lapse will precipitate the sentences in question to veer towards the outmoded, the modern and the monological of undifferentiated and noncontextualised systems, ontology, metaphysics or sheer opinion.

As ever, Heaney's critical and creative idiom provides one parallel for Muldoon's lines. 'A Collegleland Catechism' is poised as a response to Heaney's critique of Muldoon as a poet 'whose swerves away from any form of poker-faced solidarity with the political programs of the Northern Catholic minority (from which he hails) have kept him so much on his poetic toes that he has practically achieved the poetic equivalent of walking on air.'[24] Muldoon's poem also communicates directly with Heaney's poetry. Such poems as 'Punishment' in *North* and 'Casualty' in *Field Work* grapple with soul-searching questions of murder, social justice, national self-determination, metaphysical justice and individual responsibility. Heaney punishes and purges his soul in homely and homiletic verses in *Station Island*. Perhaps the Nobel Laureate's 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' in *North* charts most mordantly the minutiae of calculated muteness in recent Northern Irish poetry. Running somewhat in contracts, that poem also postulates the primacy of artistic articulation:

> I believe any of us
> Could draw the line through bigotry and sham,
> Given the right line, *aere perennius*. (*North*, 53)

'Freedman' in the same collection confesses to poetry as a means of liberation from religion and suppressive structures. If the critical controversy in the wake of *North*, Muldoon's interpoetic responses included, especially in *The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants* (*Q*, 40–64), suggests that Heaney's collection did not manage to disengage art from communal commitment, religious inclinations and political encroachments, Heaney's quest for right balances recurs in *The Spirit Level*, a prominent counterweight to *Moy Sand and Gravel*. The duality of Heaney's image and the levity of the title poem suggest new points

24 Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, 52. Scammel expresses a similar view in 'Mid-Air Street? Review of *Meeting the British* by Paul Muldoon,' 144–146.

of equipoise, new notes in Heaney's solemnity that might respond to Muldoonian stratagems. Nevertheless, Heaney is never in doubt of which way to tilt the scales if the weights cannot be evenly distributed. 'Weighing In' proportions systems of estimation by placing a 56 lb. weight, 'a solid iron unit of negation,' on a weighbridge as a metaphor for personal aggravation and social inequality. Impartiality, however, has its limits:

> Two sides of every question, yes, yes, yes …
> But every now and then, just weighing in
> Is what it must come down to, and without
> Any self-exculpation or self-pity. (*The Spirit Level,* 18)

In this volume, 'Eugenio Montale: The Eel' adheres to the familiar imagery of their antithetical amicability by contrasting equipoise and altitude with the pelagic and lacustrine in what amount to lithe exchanges of line and sentence between the two poets. A dislocated voice in 'The Gravel Walks' of *The Spirit Level* echoes Heaney's judgment of Muldoon's airiness when it (self-) admonishes without address:

> So walk on air against your better judgment
> Establishing yourself somewhere in between
> Those solid batches mixed with grey cement
> And a Tune called 'The Gravel Walks' that conjures green. (139)

Muldoon responds to a letter by 'Doctor Heaney' in one of the poems in *The Prince of the Quotidian*:

> the great physician of the earth
> is waxing metaphysical, has taken to 'walking on air';
> as Goethe termed it, *Surf and Turf.* (14)

Muldoon's Gravelet and the air ship of Heaney's Clonmacnoise poem in *Seeing Things*, 'Lightening viii' (62), offer two summits in their companionship of letters and in their use of metaphors of elevation. Furthermore: is the she goat, which is 'walking on air, / bounding, vaulting, pausing in mid-career,' in Muldoon's 'The Mud Room' (*H,* 3) possibly a figure of Heaney or himself? Does Heaney pass sentence on their lofty lines in his Nobel Lecture: 'For once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air'?[25] Heaney's poetics

25 Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, 11.

provides one of the points of reference for new publications by Muldoon. Muldoon's evolving poetics provided for many years one the reference points for Heaney's publications. Yet, despite mutual concerns and similar imagery, they still approach the balances of poetics, religion and politics differently. Nevertheless, they share a sincere concern for righteousness, a concern symbolised by Diogenes in both Heaney's title poem to the *The Haw Lantern* and Muldoon's 'A Collegeland Catechism.'

Showmanship on a line stretched between poles presents the importance of the imaginative in the bridging of gaps. Unpredictably, cultural artefacts and events can contribute to conciliation in avenues not available to pragmatic politics and economic egalitarianisation. The unification on stage of the UUP leader, David Trimble, and the SDLP leader, John Hume, by the means of the lead singer of Dublin's world famous rock band U2, Bono, at the concert of Northern Ireland's top rock group, Ash, at the gleaming new Waterfront Hall in Belfast on Tuesday 19 May 1998 in an impromptu publicity coup for pro-peace accord campaigners by a rock celebrity three days prior to the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement offers a very mundane manifestation of such lofty truisms in the recent history of Northern Ireland.[26]

Gravelet is only present in the poem as an implicit response to the rhetorical questions, as are Cúchulainn, Diogenes and the articulation of canine conceits. The Cúchulainn figure is called into play by rhyme and responses to a set of extraordinary questions that might derive their main motivation from this enigmatic figure in the first place. Doggy style treatment of presence and purity – poetic, national or religious – plays on the hound of Cúchulainn, the Canadian colloquialism for an Irish Roman Catholic as dogan, the cynicism of Diogenes and a variety of other idiosyncratic doglegs. Muldoon's many crossings of line and sentence in this idiosyncratic catechism also call into question issues of religion, arts and poetry.

'A Collegeland Catechism,' as the title indicates, also crosses geographical and patriotic lines. The arrival in Armagh by way of New Jersey echoes a Joycean re-route to Ireland from abroad that refracts opinionated insularity and conducts a deliberate cracking of internal codes and self-contained life, a re-routing that is not unlikely to instigate censorship from various camps. Questions and answers, again, incessantly indict Muldoon's previous poetic engagement with religious orthodoxy and canine whims, and with Gaelic mythology and Western philosophy, and it is an example of Muldoon's

26 Suzanne Breen, 'Bono's Unusual Support Act Wins Standing Ovation,' *The Irish Times*, 20 May 1998, 1. See also 'U2's Bono Helps Promote Belfast Peace Agreement,' CNN Interactive.

enigmatic linkage of disparate poems that the atmosphere of interrogation, police pursuit and textual reduplication recalls the text-driven terrorist tale 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' at the end of *Quoof*. Furthermore, the moral imprimatur of 'A Collegelands Catechism' follows logically from the erotic innuendo and dressage of lines in the preceding double sonnet, 'The Whinny.' 'Beagles,' the succeeding poem, defaces the alternative catechism's canine conceits. Formal? Clever? Abstruse? No doubt.

Still, 'A Collegelands Catechism' confronts religious predeterminism and processes of cognitive foreclosure. As the title specifies, these verses question the religious didacticism and juvenile instruction in Muldoon's birthplace, Collegeland, a rural area in County Armagh close to Moy, which was formerly the property of Trinity College, Dublin. Some of the structures of belief and education that form individual lives in problematic ways, with regard to which this poem raises questions, are formerly visited in such poems as 'The Bishop' and 'Anseo' in *Why Brownlee Left*. They also remonstrate against doctrines of confession, concepts of original sin and methods of rigorous education. This remonstrance against fundamental tenets of Catholic theology is no oblique expression of subversive Lutheran Protestantism: 'A Collegelands Catechism' responds to and displaces religious logocentrism, particularly the dogmatic Lutheran theology, church and catechism, in favour of a secular relativism. Such destabilisations of teleological dialogue also extend to Socratic dialogue in higher education. The poem's questioning into being of Diogenes evokes the life and stoicism of the Greek philosopher who is notorious for dogging Antisthenes' footsteps, for publicly mocking Alexander the Great and the upper echelons of society, and for disputing the teachings of Socrates and Plato. Interrogative sentences in 'A Collegeland Catechism' engender critical inquiry of religious doctrines and institutionalised philosophy.

Formally, the stanzaic chiasmus of this double sonnet with no volta mirrors elision of a distinctively divisive central line: line and sentence are elegantly balanced and integrated. Subdivided into seven quatrains, the composition incorporates mythic and mystic numerology in yet another example of how, in sonnets, Muldoon really ex-cells. In these shifting contexts, it can be no accident that Muldoon chose 'A Collegelands Catechism' for a virtual presentation on the internet for a number of years. Where the potentials of play in 'The Plot' in *Hay* appear to be arrested by their transcription on paper, hypertextuality realised the many virtualities, lexical links, imagined combinations and the flow and stream of in these lines and sentences.[27] The digital version of the poem seemed a bold attempt to balance the art of poetry in the crossing from

27 The animated enactment of 'A Collegeland Catechism' figured for some time on Paul Muldoon's home page, but has since been taken down.

one medium over to another, from the traditional page to the digital space. Thus, the translineality and many crossings in and of 'A Collegeland Catechism' make this double sonnet a very peculiar poem, a poem in which the interrogative sentence develops its own dynamics to prick and to poke the great and the small of the human condition.

Whereas 'A Collegeland Catechism' develops its heuristic questioning from interrogative syntax, 'The Grand Conversation' enacts its meditations upon encounters between cultures and individuals through the language of discourse and dialogue. Whereas the first tends to splinter grand conversations of religion, politics, arts and language into a gamut of questions, the second tends to turn quotidian talk towards the higher spheres. A major question nevertheless emerges: what is this grand conversation? These two poems overlap by other means too. Just as Muldoon's catechism with no given answers suggests a metaphysical vacuum to man's quest for meaning, the titular promise of grand importance places the quest for meaning in life between individual life and its larger contexts. 'The Grand Conversation' takes the form of a dialogue between *She* and *He*. The two interlocutors compare and contrast their personal religious, historical, social and political background – with a glance to linguistics too, of course. The two speakers could be clergy, politicians, activists, or your woman and man on the street. They could also be man and wife. *She* comes from a Jewish community in a Polish-Russian border town, 'Korelitz / where they grew cucumbers / and studied the Talmud;' *He* comes from 'the mud / of mangold- and potato-pits' in 'Comber,' County Down, Northern Ireland (41). They both share a background of oppression and persecution and the hardships of emigration in America. Both persons overlap in background with American writer Jean Hanff Korelitz and her husband Paul Muldoon. They both speak in well-defined strong sentences, a series of serious statements far removed from daily chit-chat, as the title so surely proclaims. What is the grand conversation? The title evokes the high rhetoric of ideas and – isms, and of larger than life terms: religion, nation, class, gender, language. One of the conversations is obviously how the individual tackles her or his background – a story which is left out of this grand debate. Another is certainly gender balance in this poem where prioritised position in the dialogue, mathematical number of lines and exact metrical measures in their shared stanzas emphasise the idea of equality. A third is cultural encounters. Most of Muldoon's poetry refuses to be reduced to the singular and the selfsame; his poems incorporate the other and the plural and the elsewhere. This poem and *Moy Sand and Gravel* enhance the staple juxtaposition of Northern/Irish and Amerindian history in Muldoon's earlier volumes with that of the Jews. In this volume, his cultural poetics of the private and the public

dimensions are often enacted along the lines of the Jew and the gentile. 'The Goy from the Moy' (78) remembers his ancestors, the 'Irish schlemiels' (81), while living with the people who 'came from Korelitz… and studied the Talmud' (41). Nevertheless, the subject matter transcends the private while often retaining a deep personal tone. The cultural confluence is no facile trope as the Jewish tradition interacts with the Arabic and American – and, no surprise, Muldoon keeps undermining its pieties with sardonic chutzpah. 'The Grand Conversation,' however, in poetic form, keeps a tight balance between rhetoric and ridicule. The tone is serious and the backgrounds to which the poem refers – the destruction of the Jewish community in Korelitz and the conflict in Northern/Ireland, the fate of Irish and Jewish immigrants in America – utterly tragic. These verses capture the pathos of other poems, for example 'The Stoic' and 'The Loaf.' Yet they also belong to the volume's continuous conversation about the wounds and enduring hardships of trauma, the hard drive that runs in the volume from 'keeping that wound green' in the initial poem via the many heart-rendering poems of personal and cultural trauma, to the complexities of the final 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999.' 'The Grand Conversation,' in title and content, also retains a scrupulous awareness of language in its enactment of Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives,' and of the postmodern condition as one in which the individual lives at the intersection of several narratives which are not necessarily communicable.[28] Muldoon's poem obviously presents how *two* individuals live *together* at the cross-section of the metanarratives of religion, history, society, gender, violence, language. His verses are also resonant with a sense of control and forbearance in this condition that has frequently been associated with commotion and deconstruction:

> Between *fearsad* and *verst*
> we may yet construct our future
> as we've reconstructed our past
> and cry out, my love, each to each
> from his or her own quicken-queach. (42)

This sentence retains a personal focus of love and overcoming in the welter of larger discourses and difference. Language, in typical postmodernist fashion, is the medium without which our condition cannot be grasped, but the richness and range of language also enlarge our condition. 'Fearsad,' Irish local

28 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiv.

name for sandbank that also gives name to the underground river Farset in Belfast, and 'verst,' Yiddish for verse, indicate the importance of language exchange in cultural encounters. Connotations of verse as versus, against and turning around, are also important here as a sense of one-upmanship characterises the conversation. The whole poem also changes tense from past to future: the focus on the past can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the time to come. Sand and verse are not chosen at random: they are the metaphorical and poetic elements that make up much of *Moy Sand and Gravel*. 'Quicken-queach,' a Muldoonesque neologism and obsolete dialect for growth of bushes, adds a dimension of fantasy and melody to love and language. The poem ends on an allusion to the biblical Absalom, King David's son who rebelled against his father and was caught and killed in a tree while fleeing on his mule: 'his nag tugs at a rein caught on a snag' (42). The final verse hints clearly towards a tragic outcome for family life under political duress, an admonishment against the costs of prioritizing the larger discourses of power and religion over the values of the individual, a poetic parallel to 'incredulity against metanarratives.' A total number of forty lines might suggest an optimistic chance of a new beginning, in its numerological allusion to the forty years of Moses and the people in the desert before entering a new era in the promised land. The couple's conversation, which also includes declarations of love, takes the form of a dialogue, the space in language for exchange of philosophy, politics and love from Plato to peace negotiations and pillow talk – a space that reaches far beyond its own linguistic medium, and which is frequently under all kinds of threat. Muldoon's poem can, in the larger scheme of things, be regarded as a small response to *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*, the treatise by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington.[29] In its literary contexts, Muldoon's poem connects directly with the dialogues of Yeats, and, intratextually, with a wide series of poems, most notably perhaps 'The Mixed Marriage' in *Mules*, 'The Mud Room' in *Hay*, and with 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning,' 'A Collegeland Catechism' and 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' in this book.[30] The sentence in 'The Grand Conversation' extends in forthright syntax and stanzaic solidity and

29 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

30 Perhaps Muldoon's poem 'The Grand Conversation' responds most directly to the dialogue between he and she in 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer.' For other of Yeats's poetic dialogues that have paved the way for Muldoon's, see his exotic recasting of the ambivalences of marriage in the context of national romanticism, 'Anashuya and Vijaya;' the strife of royal combat and philosophical meditation in 'Fergus and the Druid;' the conflict of song and strife in the pastoral 'Shepherd and Goatherd;' views of literature in 'Ego

navigates the many moral issues at stake in the poem. From a larger perspective, it is evident that the composition and content of the poem turn more towards synthesis and coherence than disunity and dissolution.

If the adlingual poems and 'A Collegelands Catechism' appear cold and clever in their cerebral cynosure, and 'The Grand Conversation' balances on a serioludic edge, 'The Loaf' and 'The Stoic' engage profoundly with more emotional human concerns without plunging into sentimentality. The primacy of commemoration in *The Annals of Chile* continues in this volume to offer extremely affecting poems that also excel in ingenious syntax and artifice. In fact, syntax and artifice may be said to strengthen their affective impact. An elegy to the Irish navvies, 'The Loaf' (47), is polished to perfection, and portrays with imaginative solidarity the dismal deprivation of the Irish canal diggers in New Jersey with a refined variation of one-line refrains that captures a poetic note of artistic distance and existential inclemency. While refurbishing the house, perhaps built by Irish navvies, the persona's tactile evocations unfold from his almost obscene attraction to a dark hole in the wall:

> When I put my eye to the hole I see one holding horse dung to the rain
> in the hope, indeed, indeed,
> of washing out a few whole ears of grain
>
> *with a wink and a wink and a winkie-wick.*
>
> And when I do at last succeed
> in putting my mouth to the horsehair-fringed niche
> I can taste the small loaf of bread he baked from that whole seed
>
> *with a link and a link and a linky-lick.* (47)

A raw sensuality that inverts the clichéd anatomy of 'Hard Drive' reveals almost corporeal affinities with the dismal fate of Irish predecessors, affinities that are also comprised by the title's play on food for survival and the intellectual activity of an idler. Implications of self-aware autorial comparisons recall Yeats's meditations in 'Ancestral Houses' and echo the biblical verses: 'Bread of deceit is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel;' 'Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask for bread, will he give a stone.' These allusions evince sympathy and present an occasion for existential

Dominus Tuus;' the confrontations of 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop' and the self-searching of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and 'The Man and the Echo.'

self-evaluation.[31] Transitions in the end from scatology to sanctification commemorate physical labour and artistic endeavour. This miracle of transubstantiation expresses compassion for victims of individual and communal destitution, and discloses human misery while at the same time it is illustrative of the uneasy poetic genesis the poet finds in this dark subject matter. The double affirmative of this aestheticisation is not necessarily comforting as the poem meditates upon a relatively unknown aspect of human suffering, and upon one aspect of the almost universal indifference to this suffering. The artistic act of overcoming ultimately confirms a dark and merciless universe. Sentence and line perfect the composition. Each of the five full-sentence stanzas starts with a temporal clause, 'When I,' and ends on the enigmatic and rhythmically varied one-line refrains. These refrains create artful dynamics of similarity and difference that are expressive of a genuine wish to connect a living artist's labour with the creativity and craft of past lives despite the passage of time. The particular feature of the one-line refrain, a close connection with the poetry of Yeats and MacNeice, and the urge for a home and a place to belong to, link this poem to the later 'Homesickness' (63–64), another masterpiece of the refrain.[32] In its compassion for the Irish navvies and in its crafty syntax, 'The Loaf' also connects directly with the twenty-four line two-sentence double-sonnet 'The Stoic' (37). This poem exudes philosophical quietude in the face of the vicissitudes of life, an individual composure that also entails civic duty. This centrepiece relates to the indefinite wound of the opening poem, and incorporates many of the tropes and traumatic themes of the volume. 'A burlapped fawn half-way across the iced-over canal,' an image of precariousness and imminent danger, is conflated with the sacrificial labour of an Irish navvy who dug the

31 Prov. 20: 17; St. Matthew 7: 9. Ciaran Carson's 'Loaf' offers another contemplation on the labours and products of physical work and imaginative contemplation in *Belfast Confetti*, 15–18.

32 For some of Yeats's striking refrains, see 'The Madness of King Goll,' 'The Stolen Child,' 'The Meditation of the Old Fisherman,' 'The Ragged Wood,' 'The Happy Townland,' 'September, 1913,' 'Beggar to Beggar Cried,' 'Running to Paradise,' 'The Mountain Tomb,' 'Easter 1916,' the Crazy Jane cycle, 'Three Songs to the Same Tune,' 'What Then?' 'The Curse of Cromwell,' 'The Ghost of Roger Casement,' 'The O'Rahilly,' 'The Wild Old Wicked Man,' 'The Pilgrim,' 'Colonel Martin,' 'Three Marching Songs,' 'Long-Legged Fly,' 'The Apparitions,' 'The Statesman's Holiday,' 'The Black Tower.' Muldoon praises MacNeice's poem 'The Taxis,' which sports an ingenious refrain, for 'the tone of voice and the humour and the bleakness of it, and the fluency and the surreal element of it, and yet the fact that in the middle of all this great invention it never leaves the real world. I'd love to be able to write a poem like that.' Perhaps this is the one? Paul Muldoon, interview by Clair Wills, Nick Jenkins and John Lanchester, 1987.

canal through the rhymes of 'fawn' and 'griffawn' (37). This sense of existential fragility and human suffering is personalised by individual tragedy, Muldoon's own in fact, when the speaking subject receives the news of losing their child in a phone call from his wife. This moment of introspection and human poignancy under the Gateway Arch in St. Louis apprehends the utmost solitary desolation. The sequestered position under the arch aligns the bereaved with the stoics, as the word stoic stems from 'meeting under doorways,' and with the strife and endurance of the Irish navvy through the bleeding instep of his foot. Arches extend to tombstone masonry and graveyard portals, and parallel the memorial bows of yew and Osage orange. Arches also give shape and significance to the poem as they span transhistorical sorrows and illustrate the poem's architecture. The final verses of this two-sentence double sonnet present two fawns and two Irish navvies as a vision riven by heartfelt pain or suffused by tears, a poetic twinning to assuage in art the loss of the child. Conversely, the gateway also marks a place of transition in time and place, a moment of looking back on sorrows, facing up to them, and moving on:

> when I got your call in St Louis and, rather than rave
> as one might rant and rave at the thought of the yew
> from Deidre's not quite connecting with the yew from Naoise's grave,
>
> rather than shudder like a bow of yew or the matchless Osage orange
> at the thought of our child already lost from view
> before it had quite come into range,
> I steadied myself under the Gateway Arch
>
> and squinted back, first of all, through an eyelet of bone
> to a point where the Souris
> had not as yet hooked up with the Assiniboine,
> to where the Missouri
>
> had not as yet been swollen by the Osage,
> then ahead to where – let's face it – there are now *two* fawns
> on the iced-over canal, two Irish navvies who've stood
> there for a veritable age
> With their long-tailed shovels or broad griffawns. (37–38)

Despite the poem's dominant sense of unity and harmony, there are several intimations of adversity. Fluctuations of life are reflected in the Heraclitean flux of rivers Souris, Assiniboine, Missouri and Osage, and in the unstoppable

pluralities of language. 'Assiniboine' implies Arabian murderers and the Battle of the Boyne, just as 'Osage Orange' hints at Amerindian persecution and religious wars. Deirdre and Naoise evoke mythical lives of love and murder, but and failure of the yews from their graves to connect retains a denial of metaphysical reunion. 'The Stoic' places private calamity at the center of mythic tragedy and historical massacres, but these artistic attempts to transcend and reconceptualise human misery are entangled in a language that is already violently plural. Muldoon confronts this comprehensive bleakness with a remarkable lack of sentimentality, and this lack of self-commiseration discloses a stoic stance that to some degree provides a moral alibi for Muldoon's adamant revisionist attitude in the volume.

These previous poems and conversations converge in the final remarkable poem, 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999.' The title points to equestrian and Amerindian tropes, but also highlights the significance of semiosis and syntax. The phrase signals the deliberate use of syntactic segments, line and sentence in this concluding poem. Specifying a time and place, New Jersey in the wake of Hurricane Floyd, the title also reveals a semiotic awareness that ponders its own representational capacities. In its prepositional positioning of a natural place name, the title alludes to Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, another multilayered text of subtle ironies and revisions. One of the poem's multidiscursive sign systems is its dialogue with Yeats. Muldoon's prayer for his own son, Asher, evokes Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter,' but also relates to 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and the first section of 'In Time of Civil War' titled *Ancestral Houses* in its revival of past family members, and in its meditations in times of dramatic change. This final text also accumulates concerns and themes that run throughout the volume, for example the green wound and the hard drives from the first poem, the relations between the Irish-American and Jewish-American couple in 'The Grand Conversation,' and the compassion for family and past lives in so many of the poems. Mixed marriage, canal construction, the Holocaust and the complexities of contemporary life are conveyed with a technical gusto that moves the reader, and that intertwines with astonishing alacrity the many words, rhythms, themes and tropes of the preceding poems that lead up to this climax. Legacies of death and annihilation flow in these forty-five stanzas that focus mainly on how new generations have to negotiate their own family, traditions and history – the prospects of a future as they present themselves to the innocent child in the pram, Muldoon's son, Asher. The achievement of 'radical innocence' in its many forms, a Yeatsian key repetition in the verse, is a premeditated act of resisting orders of all kinds that appear in the poem as peremptory pronouncements. With pointed religious irreverence, the verses refer to fraud,

crime and murder in the Rothstein scandals and the Jewish mafia, they recount how Asher is denied religious rites, and they revel in a peccary barbecue. The verses radically challenge any purist orthodoxy, whether Jewish, poetic, aesthetic or linguistic. Alliterative connections and allusive connotations of 'peccary' (unclean meat) with 'peccavi' (acknowledgement of sin) and 'peccadillo' (trifling offence) indicate these intricacies. Phrase, clause and sentence, enjambment and free lines undulate with the flood and ebb of Hurricane Floyd:

> bearing clay, hay, hair (at shoulder height, or above)
>   through the awesome
>
> morning after Hurricane Floyd as yet another 1921 Benz or 1924 Bugatti
> came down Canal Road and yet another peaked
> cap was enquiring of my child-kin the meaning of '*Ashkenaz,*'
> Place Mask Over Mouth and Nose,
> my trepidation becoming more and more
> pronounced as that smoke would flail and fling itself over Auschwitz.
> I looked up from our make-believe version of Boscobel Beach
> to a cauterized stump of sassafras or sycamore
>
> as the creel carters piled more and more clay, hay, hair,
>   spectacle frames, *Willkommen*,
> on to the line of carrioles and camions
> by the edge of the flooded stream, those creel carters
>   imagining in excited reverie
> the arches of the bridge wrought with the motto *Arbeit Macht Frei*,
> while I looked up through the swing
> and swale of smoke, Please Leave A Message After The Beep, (82–83)

Benz and Bugatti appear as mobile antiquities with a hard drive from previous poems, and from the time and profits of illegal liquor trafficking by Jewish predecessors to the Irish canal diggers at the moment when an outsider, as the mispronunciation of 'Ashkenaz' reveals, literally questions the Jewish tradition. Ashkenazi inserts in a single response the majority of Jews in the ashes of the Nazi concentration camps and excludes by silence the Sephardi minority. At the same time, the term also introduces the art of the Jewish pianist from Russia, Vladimir Davidovic Ashkenazy, who emigrated to London and Iceland. Many of the interpolated orders in the poem, in the form of imperative sentences, refer directly to the horrors of Auschwitz, and indirectly to numerous situations of flight, crime, massacre and recording of verbal messages.

Conflations of names and traditions, codes and messages, past and present, convey the end of any single discourse or dominant version of the past and the present: these are the multiple metanarratives into which Asher and the new generation are born. In its radical form, linguistic opprobrium and semiotic self-awareness, 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' signals a revisionist attitude and scepticism about grand narratives, as the forty-five stanzas both subsume and rewrite the themes, tropes and techniques of the volume's forty-five poems, and thus initiates at the end a rereading of the book and, perhaps, Muldoon's oeuvre and textual templates. A total number of 360 lines buttresses such circularity; the stanzaic numerology recalls, for example, the composition of 'Incantata.' In like manner, the numerological importance of 45 stanzas also remarks the WWII cease-fire in 1945, and provokes a reinterpretation of cognitive formations of that trauma and, possibly, the preceding years of the catastrophe. These revaluations are not a cancellation of historical facts, but a questioning of what facts and traditions are selected and interpreted in what ways by which interests. In their traversal of disputed formal and linguistic terrain, these sentences also evince how the media, by which information and discourses of the known and the unknown circulate, are also subjected to aporia and alteration. In the aftermath of the linguistic century, presentations of the past and the present that ignore their own positions, delimitations and possibilities, risk foreclosure from the outset. The final sentence on the past is illusory.

Moy Sand and Gravel continues Muldoon's consistent exploration of language. The volume's metalinguistic dimension of questioning, measuring and analysing language drives the volume's critical and meditative approach to the phenomena of the past, and to the dilemmas of mortality. The volume combines his full armoury of lexical invention, turning of line and metamorphoses of form with a noticeable concentration on the sentence in all its meanings. Lines of variable texture and length, by which Muldoon conducts his bold linguistic ploys and allusive jugglery, elicit different responses from the settings in which they appear, and the horizons beneath which they are read. The linking of poems by vocabulary, allusion, contrast, rhythm, sound distribution, far-fetched fantasy and various other uncanny strategies, in addition to their content, extends the boundaries of individual poems, pushing back their hermeneutic boundaries. The sentence, understood as syntax, pronouncement, logic and judicial decision, adds a new note of synthesis and construction to his poetry. Muldoon's frequent preference for alphabetic atomism and inconclusive lineality has stretched itself to embrace larger linguistic units. At a time of religious dogmatic inflexibility, of the stern fronts of decommissioning and of artistic demarcation, Muldoon, often in reciprocation with Heaney's poetics

and Yeats's stanzaic stringency and passionate syntax, has hit upon a subtle and strict stylistic device in his dedication to serve his sentence. It is a fitting and ironic, but very unfortunate, imposition that the book's format cuts short the long sentences and disfigures many of the poems' artistic designs. This imposition of print and page restrictions, not unlike the italicisation in the first edition of *New Weather*, indicate a different dimension of power with which the written word often relates. Still full of sombre Adorninan concerns, in its typical Muldoonian idiosyncrasy and its many turns of sentence, *Moy Sand and Gravel* offers a more sentential side to the language of Muldoon's poetry, and issues an existentialist reminder that 'life is indeed no more than "a misprint / in the sentence of death."'

CHAPTER 10

Horse Latitudes

'Presto: we are in the horse latitudes of language, from which we'll never get out,' critic William Pratt writes of *Horse Latitudes*. His reservations echo clearly Jameson's treatise, *The Prison House of Language*, and critique of Derrida's philosophical project as a vortex of adlinguistic reduction.[1] His comment also reveals that Muldoon's poetry is as language-focused as ever, and that commentators have become increasingly sensitised to the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry. Muldoon's tenth volume of poetry from Faber and Faber in the year he added the European Prize for Poetry to his extensive list of awards, 2006, continues the prominent interest in the functions, inconsistencies and complexities of language. The familiar subject matter of sorrow and despair and of Adornian existential crisis is still in evidence; the volume delves into cancer, death and war. The ambiguities of 'keeping that wound green' from *Moy Sand and Gravel* (3), in the sense of cultivating or curing crisis and trauma, with particular connotations of Irish issues, suggest one of the recurrent threads of this volume too. Questions of how to tackle and overcome individual crisis and public catastrophe prevail in the volume. From war on the very first page through disease and massacre in the following poems, the volume traverses a full gamut of woes: personal, social, political, historical and medical. This latter medical realm of adversity finds expression in pathological terminology, from 'Hypersarcoma' (a tumour-related bodily excrescence) to 'mesotheliomata' – Muldoon's coinage for the stigmata of malignant tumour of tissue, especially lungs and abdomen – on the last page. This time Muldoon's sister is incorporated in the catalogue of death by cancer – 'In Memory of Maureen Muldoon 1953–2005' – as is his friend and fellow artist Warren Zevon, who died of pleural mesothelioma in 2003. Thematically, the verses include consideration of individual love and loss in the contexts of violence and war, and they commemorate family and friends while also, on occasion, reverting to Irish matters. Personal pain is always placed in a wider perspective in poker-faced avoidance of unchecked emotionalism, nostalgia and self-pity. Concerns of

1 William Pratt, 'Review of *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' *World Literature Today* 81, no. 5 (2007), 71; Jürgen Habermas, 'Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida's Critique of Phonocentrism,' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 161–184.

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Ireland and America are always balanced by a larger world, which also suffers from pain and affliction.

Muldoon's language is nevertheless fresh in form. How to construe the longer units of *langue* remains one of the main guiding principles for this volume. Perhaps the sentence, in all its protean powers, runs even more smoothly now, and assumes ever more variegated contours of symbolic significance. Sentence-specific exhortations still decide prosody and composition, and augment the hermeneutic range. Some of the turns are new, some of them are established. How does the careful construction of sentences that reflect their own composition augment the individual poem's significance? 'The Outlier' composes its own sentences with Euclidean logic and precision. How far can a sentence be stretched in a single poem while still retaining sense and cohesion? 'Tithonus' runs a single sentence across 28 lines. 'Turkey Buzzards' employs a single sentence for over 100 lines in 25 quatrains. How short can a sentence be and how many sentences can you compress into a few lines? Many of the haikus in '90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore' include sentences, number 'III' possibly seven – a sentence minimalism that mirrors the sonnet minimalism in the Sunlight Soap italicette in 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' (*Q*, 62). Haikus operate as prison cells for sentences and the instant messages series resembles another Muldoonesque alterrative, almost a Madoc in haiku form, an intergeneric splicing of Japanese minimalist form with the entangled narratives of Tom Moore's art and life, and Muldoon's own literature and life. If the Sunlight Soap italicette in *Quoof* remains the microscopic test cell for empowering the sonnet tradition by ultimate poetic economy, the traditional Japanese form offers similar artistic motivation. In far less space. Muldoon's three-line stanzas contain a number of sentences that run from one to seven, depending, naturally, on the definition of the sentence. If 'sentence' is defined along the standard lines of words in connected speech and writing that express a single thought between one full stop and the other, then haiku 'III' includes seven sentences that tend to place themselves ambiguously across the ordinary categories of discursive functions from declarative and interrogative to imperative and exclamatory. The thought that Muldoon serves some sentence even though he is now free and no longer a prisoner, as the lines in 'Two Stabs at Oscar' (MSG, 65) imply, also informs and illuminates *Horse Latitudes*. One-sentence sonnets – 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003,' 'Now Pitching Himself Like a Forlorn Hope' and 'Hedge School,' – appear again with their own compositional logic; 'The Coyote' turns a sentence over six tercets and a large number of one-sentence stanzas also occur. Striking refrains and repetitions characterise 'At Least They Weren't Speaking French,' 'Flags and

Emblems,' 'The Outlier' and 'The Old Country.' Several poems continue the turning of the sentence: 'Flags and Emblems' starts with a wh-sentence and retains an interrogative stance, 'Tithonus' and 'Hedge School' start with a negative clause. Numerous poems start with clauses and phrases of all kinds, anything but a full sentence. An incessant exploitation and questioning of diverse modes of poetic language – rhymes and rhythms, form and prosody, idioms and vocabulary, sentence and syntax – are characteristic of the volume as a whole, together with a refined capacity to prise open the hermeneutic possibilities of language variation in larger contexts. Such critical reviewing of the very medium of art maintains the connection between Muldoon's language and the many contexts with which it interacts. His incessant auto-critical creativity also retains ethical responsibility, and bears sentence upon self-glorifying and self-exonerating discourses.

The man, who according to fellow poet Michael Longley can rhyme a cat with a dog, continues his aural extravaganza with 'circus / Sargasso,' 'radiator / off-roader,' 'other / weather,' 'of palm / salaam' (26), 'undies / Sundays' (38), 'lieutenants / pennants' (56), 'raw recruits / parachutes' (63) and 'Izaac Walton / Coast subaltern' (97).[2] Decisive couplets, narrative haikus, deft tercets, complex quatrains, refined roundels and resourceful villanelles complement the reign of metamorphic sonnets. Sound and structure are paralleled by numerological specificity. '90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore' (53–76) overlaps in numerological structure and intratextual technique with the 90 tercets in 'Sillyhow Stride' (95–107). 'The Old Country' portrays familiar ground in a series of thirteen sonnets, an obvious numerological and formal combination of misfortune and love. Furthermore, despite its rejuvenations, the strings of solid rhymes, clichés and proverbs in this poem serve as a template for jaded spirits: 'Every resort was a last resort / with a harbour that harboured an old grudge. / Every sale was a selling short' (39). The poet who once renovated the status of cliché – 'Yes, well clichés are clichés for very good reasons. There's a hell of a lot in them' – has a field day with linguistic, conceptual and national clichés that exploit the span between satire and seriousness that the serioludic ambiguities of 'keeping that wound green' opened up in 'Hard Drive' (MSG, 3).[3] Interwoven simile, used with such force in his earliest volumes, reappears in protracted form in 'Eggs.' A formidable formal dexterity, vocabulary beyond the *Oxford English Dictionary*, linguistic questioning, impossible rhymes, contextual awareness, intrapoetic orchestration and a final crescendo are some of the staple standards Muldoon has set for his own art from the very beginning. Verses

2 Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian*, 29; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 141.
3 Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon,' 83.

also thrive on semantic confusion, for example over the beans and instruments of flageolet (69–70). Synonyms abound, for example 'weasel,' 'whitrack' and 'whitterick' in 'The Old Country.' Muldoon still masters the myriads of possibilities that language can draw from, but in *Horse Latitudes*, like in *Moy Sand and Gravel*, there tends to be more of a drive towards the polished and the constructive than towards the pitfalls and more deconstructive aspects of language.

Many critics comment on the language of *Horse Latitudes*, both with admiration and in less favourable terms. Jason B. Jones notes that in his ability 'to infuse the most arcane language and strictest forms with urgent meaning, Muldoon unleashes the innovative force of repetition.'[4] Langdon Hammer follows suit in his review, which pivots upon the discussion of the serious and ludic qualities of Muldoon's poetry, and concludes: 'In Anglo-Saxon "silly" meant "blessed," and "sillyhow" is an archaic, probably Scottish word for a holy caul, or mask. Muldoon's wit and wordplay can be seen as that, a mask. Is he really serious? Yes indeed, but readers will keep asking the question, as they still do of Jonathan Swift and James Joyce.'[5] Pratt – the critic who finds himself and everyone else entrapped in 'the horse latitudes of language, from which we'll never get out' – on the contrary, is far more critical. He notices the American features and the alterrative tendencies in the volume, and condemns its linguistic solipsism: 'Muldoon mimics American slang and mixes it with literary allusions in a hash of colorful, unquotable pastiche, full of verbal echoes, a series of non sequiturs without beginning, middle, or end.'[6] James Fenton, who thinks there is a way out, at least for the poet, recognises the subtleties of Muldoon's language, and acknowledges with reservation his involvement with human wretchedness:

> Accustomed as we sometimes are to smile at the brilliance of his verbal transformations, his attention to every slightest syllable, his alertness to the opportunities offered by rhyme and form ('Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini'), we may sometimes wish this escapologist had not so swiftly nipped out through the

4 Jason B. Jones, '*Horse Latitudes* and *the End of the Poem* by Paul Muldoon,' http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2007_01_010474.php, accessed 25 April 2019.

5 Langdon Hammer, 'Gamesmanship,' *The Sunday Book Review*, 18 February 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/books/review/Hammer.t.html., accessed 17 February 2019.

6 Pratt, 'Review of *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' 71.

> bathroom window but had stayed around a little longer. He is, after all, in this volume, asking us to share in great distress.[7]

Helen Vendler, Heaney's champion in America who once stated of Muldoon 'that his lyrics were impressively constructed but too often had a hole in the middle where the feeling should be,' now writes that he 'seems to me a more convincing poet now than he was 10 or 15 years ago,' and that 'he has been able, in his finely maintained tightrope act, to bear aloft both grief and playfulness.'[8] Fran Brearton notes the volume's trans-Atlantic outlook, comments on its resourceful use of language, and draws attention to a much–ignored component: 'Horse Latitudes, for all its "play," is therefore also a deeply political book.'[9] Muldoon himself offers some explanations of the political dimension of the book in didactic terms that also elucidate some of the technique of the title poem:

> I started the sonnet sequence 'Horse Latitudes' as the U.S. embarked on its foray into Iraq. The poems have to do with a series of battles (all beginning with the letter 'B' as if to suggest a 'missing' Baghdad) in which horses or mules played a major role. Intercut with those battle-scenes are accounts of a 'battle' with cancer by a former lover, here named Carlotta, and a commentary on the agenda of what may only be described as the Bush 'regime.'[10]

These reviews tend to testify to a gradual understanding of how Muldoon's original, estranged and frequently shocking insights into the human condition in his poetry are predicated upon language. They also constitute a considerably more profound hermeneutic engagement with his language beyond the binary of linguistic levity and thematic seriousness that has dominated has dominated much reviewing and dictated the terms of the critical debate, although it is very clear that some commentators are still delimited by this

7 James Fenton, 'A Poke in the Eye with a Poem: *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Guardian*, 21 October 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview6., accessed 15 February 2019.

8 Helen Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes,' 58–59; 'Fanciness and Fatality: Review of *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' *The New Republic* 235, no. 19 (2006), 26–33.

9 Fran Brearton, 'Muldoon "Goes Native" across the Pond? Review of *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' *Tower Poetry*, no. 3 (2007), 8.

10 Paul Muldoon, *Medley for Murin Khur* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005), 6.

mentality.[11] Strangely, only one of the critics, Brearton, connects this volume to the immediate contexts of contemporary political discourse and current wars. This instant recognition of the volume's immediate relevance comes natural to the author of *The Great War in Irish Poetry* and 'Poetry and the Northern Ireland Troubles.'[12] Muldoon's explicit explanation, like previous ones, for example the one on Bloody Sunday as a political backdrop for 'The Last of The Sloes, for Ishi' in *New Weather*, also reminds readers of how Muldoon's poetry always relates to immediate contexts of political contention, ideological combat and the tragedies of war, no matter how tangential his imaginative leaps and unconventional language might appear. Indeed, his ludic quality, which 'swerves away from any form of poker-faced solidarity with the political programmes,' and his capacity to defy poetic and prosodic gravity in 'the poetic equivalent of walking on air,' often tend to delude many critics of the serious qualities of his language-oriented poetics.[13]

Direct comments by Muldoon on the political connections of his poetry are rare. Probably, Muldoon's explicitness on Bush and the Iraq war was prompted by the limited and most likely new readership of his art edition for Enitharmon

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11 Those who see Muldoon as a meretricious formalist and preposterous prankster will not rest their case. Neither will the defenders who praise his iconoclastic methods and detect in all his levity sincere moral concerns. 'To those who enjoy having a leg pulled, Muldoon is your man; to those who expect something more substantial from poetry, Muldoon rhymes with buffoon,' William Pratt concludes in '*The Annals of Chile* by Paul Muldoon,' 365. Kendall labels Muldoon a 'perennial spoofer of false piety,' but acknowledges this as one of the poet's strengths, *Paul Muldoon*, 211. The jury is out in Eve Patten's 'Clever, Comic, Liberating,' 26–27. Helen Vendler changes her view on Muldoon's lack of compassion to a more convincing poet in 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes,' 57–60; 'Fanciness and Fatality: Review of *Horse Latitudes* by Paul Muldoon,' 26–33. 'He rides the wave of his swank virtuosity, but chaos and sorrow underlie it,' Laura Quinney concludes her review 'In the Studebaker. *Moy Sand and Gravel* by Paul Muldoon,' 21. MacFarlane agrees in his review of the same collection: 'Those who think of Paul Muldoon as the benign, pudgy Puck of contemporary poetry, imping around with a mischievous grin on his type-face, miss the vital dimension of his ethical seriousness in which his work exists.' 'High and Dry in the Flood. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 24. Despite reservations and incisive critique, the reviews and articles over many years by Seamus Heaney, Edna Longley, John Banville, Derek Mahon, John Goodby and William Wilson reveal that they are in no doubt about the significance of Muldoon's poetry.

12 Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); 'Poetry and the Northern Ireland Troubles,' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century English and American War Literature*, ed. A. Piette and M. Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 222–230.

13 Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, 52. For Muldoon's comment on his poem and Bloody Sunday, see 'Notes for "Chez Moy: A Critical Autobiography"' (unpublished manuscript, 1994), in Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 38; Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 41.

Press, *Medley for Murin Kuhr*, in which 'Horse Latitudes' was first published.[14] Possibly, Muldoon's outspokenness is a reflection of his involvement with an American society where direct statements and vociferous declarations hold a position that was almost unthinkable in the guarded and coded exchanges and the mentality of muteness in Northern Ireland at war – the situation articulated so precisely in Heaney's 'The Ministry of Fear' and 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing.' Muldoon's revelatory and informative explication ties his poetry directly to the war in Iraq. His words also demonstrate the importance of language, and explain some of his technique and thematic choices. Moreover, they set up one specific structure of hermeneutic possibility that tends to reduce more than it augments interpretation. Such directness occurs from time to time in the volume too. Nevertheless, the title and the poems in this volume, like its language – an inseparable double harness – retain a strangeness and restive force which are sufficient to resist and break through many of the imposed directives, including those of the author.

Horse Latitudes, a rather rare nautical term, emphasises Muldoon's focus on language and trans-Atlantic exchange. In the language of nautical meteorology, 'horse latitudes' designates a sphere close to both sides of equator – between the doldrums and the trade winds – that is characterised by calm waters and light winds. Sometimes the ship was conveyed by strong currents despite the lack of winds. On some occasions sailors had to jettison horses in this zone to lighten the ship's load and in order to preserve limited supplies. On occasion, seamen carried out the dead horse rituals in the same regions, by flogging an effigy of a horse and throwing it overboard, to celebrate the end of their initial period of labour for seamen's wages and the day they would actually start earning money. These horse latitudes capture forcefully current issues of trade and cultural exchange between continents, and serve as an image of the complex condition of globalisation. Images of horse-loaded ships also recall the times of Columbus, conquistadors and conquest, a time when these ships were as much vessels of war as of trade and transport. From the perspective of language and literature, the subtropical latitudes provide wide seas of semiosis and significance for a volume on the crossings of culture by a Hiberno-American poet. One of the many latitudes of the title implies a dimension of self-interrogation into the export value of an increasingly world-renowned poet in his fifties with hoof prints firmly indented on the paddock of contemporary poetry. Since Muldoon's emergence from the disturbances in Northern

14 This art edition by Enitharmon Press contains 'Medley for Morin Kuhr' and 'Horse Latitudes,' and was published in a limited edition of 200. See Moi, '*The Testament of Cresseid* by Seamus Heaney and *Medley for Morin Kuhr* by Paul Muldoon,' 277–281.

Ireland in the early 1970s, his move to the United States in 1987, the continuous crossings of the Atlantic ever since, and his rise to fame over the last three decades, one might ask: does he need to discharge some of the vital cargo of his poetics, or change the track of his established course?

Horse Latitudes also invokes many-layered horse idioms, of which 'hobby horse,' 'horse play' and 'to flog a dead horse' spring instantly to mind in relation to the poetry of a rider who has turned by turns from a form of linguistic bareback to a more sober type of linguistic dressage. Horses run wild across the whole terrain of Muldoon's artistic career. From 'Dancers at the Moy' and the enigmatic 'The Radio Horse' in *New Weather*, via the bestiary of *Mules*, to the speaking horse head in 'Gathering Mushrooms' in *Quoof* and to 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' in the previous volume *Moy, Sand and Gravel*; in these examples, horses trot, gallop, jolt and bolt, flexing the muscles of artistic, erotic and linguistic force. Most memorable, perhaps, are the shifting horses in 'Why Brownlee Left' and Bucephalus, the speaking horse of that restive enigma, 'Madoc – A Mystery.' Certainly, the title points to wider horizons, and to artistic licence and liberation. A full range of poetic powers are in evidence including Swiftian satire and Tolstoyean alternatives of narration. The *ostranenie* of Russian Formalism is one mode among others which makes use of the imaginative powers of horses and the alphabetic constructions of language in order to defamiliarise ourselves from ourselves – in the style of Swift's Houyhnhnms – for the sake of better acknowledging the widespread folly and inhumanity of humankind. The choice of George Stubbs' *Mares and Foals without a Background* as the cover illustration to *Horse Latitudes* recalls Muldoon's many ekphrastic poems and the painstaking research that his artistic anatomy entails, first and foremost his equestrian exactitude. Similarly, the allusion to the song with the same title by The Doors on *Strange Days* hints at Muldoon's (earlier) rebellious attitude at the the musical culture which is part of his own writing, particularly 'Sleeve Notes' in *Hay*, and at his lyrics in *General Admission* and *The Word on the Street*. If the rock reference seems abstruse, it is, however, surely deliberate by the lyric writer and intermittent guitarist for his own garage rock bands (The Rackett, Wayside Shrines and Rogue Oliphant) and the text writer for some of the late album tracks ('My Ride's Here' and 'Macgillycuddy's Reeks') of Warren Zevon, Muldoon's friend and the subject of this volume's final elegy.

Naturally, the beasts also inhabit this volume. Morin Khur, 'the thoroughbred of Mongolian violins' (89), discloses the significance of horses to the volume's aesthetic architecture and polished language: 'The sound box is made of a horse's head. / The resonator is a horse skin. / The strings and bow are of horsehair.' The instrument stems from the carcasses of 'a body-strewn central

square' (89). 'Medley for Morin Khur' constitutes a composition cold and passionate as carnage in its transposition of atrocity and massacre into art and melody. In its crystallisation of cruelty into blinding beauty and deafening musicality, the poem not only works as a defense of poetry, it also postulates that the song of suffering is as valuable as airs of romance. The poem's powerful poignancy and apprehensive aestheticisation captivate the reader and draw her/him into the wrangles of war and writing.

This apotheosis of the horse works as a counterpoint to the riding, whipping and horse play that appear throughout the volume. In all their multiple meanings, the horses also work as beasts of language throughout Muldoon's oeuvre. They belong to the same linguistic bestiary as the 'Hedgehog,' *Mules*, the yeti and shy beasts in 'Quoof,' 'Pangur,' S – and the whole school of eels. 'A bit like an eel – this equestrienne's whip' runs a line in 'Alba' (26), almost as a self-referential note on how Muldoon splices genres, forms, imagery and language as if drawing himself away from standard categories and selfsameness, and from a uniform use of language. In one of the poems in *Horse Latitudes*, 'Glaucus,' the Corinthian king, has trained his horses so well for battle that they cause his own demise: 'Glaucus was still on such a roll / it was lost on him that the high point of the games / was his being eaten now by his own mares' (91). The King of Corinth's war ambitions have caught up on him. His own secret weapon, the war-crazed horses fed on human flesh, causes his own death and destruction. The image is as shocking as it is striking in its evocation of the international arms trade. Seemingly, the lines resonate with nightmarish self-observation. They certainly illustrate horrifically the artistic powers of letters and language, and the battles with language in the poetry of Muldoon.

The polyvalent power of the horses also suggests strongly how the many beasts and birds in this book shiver and soar with artistic power and poetic flight. The poematic inquietude of 'Hedgehog' (*NW*, 27) and the parabolic admonitions and 'moral for our times' in 'The Frog' (*Q*, 29), two poems that also record the recalcitrance of language and reference, prepare the ground for many of the poems in this volume.[15] 'Turtles,' another Muldoonian image for

15 For other beast poems in Muldoon's poetry, see 'Big Foot', (*Q*, 18), 'Beaver' (*Q*, 19), 'The Salmon of Knowledge' (*Q*, 23), 'Mink' (*Q*, 28), 'The Frog' (*Q*, 29), 'The Unicorn Defends Himself' (*Q*, 34), 'The Coney' (*MTB*, 3), 'Chinook' (*MTB*, 9), 'Brock' (*MTB*, 12), 'The Fox' (*MTB*, 24), 'The Soap-Pig' (*MTB, 25*), 'Capercailles' (*Mad*, 6), 'The Panther' (*Mad*, 9), 'Rainer Maria Rilke: *The Unicorn*' (*H*, 17), 'Beagles' (*MSG*, 17), 'The Otter' (*MSG*, 30), 'John Luke: *The Fox'* (*MSG*, 31), 'The Goose' (*MSG*, 67), 'The Redknots' (*MSG*, 71), 'Turtles' (*HL*, 50), 'Turkey Buzzards' (*HL*, 78), 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003' (*HL*, 82), 'The Coyote' (*HL*, 83), 'Medley for Morin Kuhr' (*HL*, 89), 'Glaucus' (*HL*, 91), 'Geese' (*Mag*, 10), 'More Geese' (*Mag*, 13), 'A Hare at Aldergrove' (*Mag*, 18), 'The Fish Ladder' (*Mag*, 23), 'Quail' (*Mag*, 26),

people and processes in Northern Ireland, reveals uncannily the crossings from one condition to another, the changing climate from war to peace in Northern Ireland, and hesitates over the processes of recovering the disappeared. The ancient reptile also indicates how language can change from sliding smoothly to crawling slowly or ending up hopelessly on its own back in different environments. The squid in 'The Landing' metaphorises the amphibian condition of military and civilisatory operations on foreign strands, the double standards of their justification, and the doublespeak of spurious explanation of their conduct in the field. The squid can also be regarded as a symbol of syntax; how the many smaller tentacles that grab their sustenance and glide through the seas unite in a larger body. 'The Coyote' and the dog in 'Now Pitching Himself like a Forlorn Hope' retain a deep sense of 'a dog's life' and 'dogs of war.' They also suggest antagonistic aspects of language and the ferocious struggle for supremacy in the spheres of politics and media, not least in questions of social welfare and international armed conflict. Beasts in this volume slouch in and towards B-cities and other locations. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of Muldoon's bestiary is how his poems incessantly present bestiality as inseparable from humanity. They are constant reminders of the human potential for cruelty, mercilessness, atrocity, massacre and unfathomable inhumanity amidst the formidable conviction of benevolence, compassion, magnanimity, solidarity, altruism and unquenchable philanthropy to which his poetry also testifies.

'Horse Latitudes,' the titular sonnet symphony of historical bloodshed and death by cancer, confirms Muldoon's fascination for syntax and the alphabet, and his strategy to engage with the larger discourses of international politics, in this case 'the agenda of what may only be described as the Bush "regime,"' as he states so precisely.[16] In these verses he refines the alphabetic method known from several of his poems, for example from the vitalogue 'The Birth' (*AC*, 31) and the alphaphilia of 'The Plot' (*H*, 15), from his anthology *The Faber Book of Beasts*, and most strikingly from his conflation of the critical and the creative idiom in his Clarendon lectures, *To Ireland, I*. In 'Horse Latitudes' any ordinary abecedarian or alpha priority order is replaced by a poetic structure of Bs.

'Francois Boucher: Arion on Dolphin' (*Mag*, 36), 'Maggot' (*Mag*, 42), 'Charles Baudelaire: 'The Albatross' (*Mag*, 62), 'Ohrwurm' (*Mag*, 72), 'Love Poem with Pig' (*Mag*, 73), 'A Mayfly' (86), 'A Hummingbird' (*Mag*, 91), 'A Second Hummingbird' (*Mag*, 92), 'A Porcupine' (*Mag*, 104), 'Another Porcupine' (*Mag*, 105), 'Capriccio in E minor for Blowfly and Strings' (*Mag*, 107), 'Cuthbert and the Otters' (*OTTWK*, 3), 'Pelt' (*OTTWK*, 13), 'Charles Émile Jacque: *Poultry Among Trees*' (*OTTWK*, 14), 'A Giraffe' (*OTTWK*, 65), 'Dromedaries and Dung Beetles' (*OTTWK*, 66). Plus all his dogs, eels and horses, of course.

16 Muldoon, *Medley for Murin Khur*, 6.

Muldoon, again, highlights the importance of the single letter; not the most obvious one, and disconnected from its alphabetic order or lexical function. Linguistic latitudes in the opening poem range from B to B, not A to Z, from Beijing and Bannockburn to Bazentin and Burma, all beginning with the letter B, with the conspicuous omission of Belfast as much as Baghdad. Such a b-regulation of letters and cities allows for the 'provocative propinquity' and 'felicitous fusion' that Muldoon frequently aims for in his alphabetic method.[17] All these voiced plosive consonants come with their own phonetic zest and the onomatopoeia of war and battle. A subtle political dimension is also included: the British are involved in most of these battles; in Belfast, America and elsewhere, just as Bush, the Americans and the British are involved in Baghdad and Basra. These B-poems also run contrary to the chronological ordering of the poetic universe in *Madoc* according to the names of individual thinkers, all the alpha protagonists of the history of ideas. Additionally, this B-template does not merely reveal a tendency for adlinguistic aestheticism or intratextual intricacies; it evinces a special aptitude towards limitation on the ordering of expansive knowledge, opens out non-temporal accounts of history, imposes arbitrary universality, and points to the many versions and visions that did not acquire priority in the formation of ideologies, civilisations, identity and aesthetics. The B-template also tends to deconstruct the grand narrative of each and all wars; they are all equally tragic, irrespective of their time and place. B-sounds, B-seriality and B-logic in these sonnets are buttressed by other Muldoonian tricks, turns and themes. Effortless rhyme distribution, smooth line turns, powerful prosody and sanguinary imagery – 'a heart-wound by a hauberk' (4), 'the checkered careers of their guts' (10), 'the mark of a hoof (or a horseshoe) in her fontanelle' (16) – testify to the apotheosis of human misery and artistic longevity. These nineteen sonnets of war also integrate the accounts of a battle against cancer by 'Carlotta.' Accounts of war and cancer run parallel like chariots of death and destruction. Muldoon's poetic hippodrome also clamours with the death and devastation of current affairs at the time of the book's publication: the Iraq war of the Bush regime. 'Blackwater Fort,' which refers to the Nine Years War in Ulster when O'Neill and O'Donnell were defeated by the English throne in 1603, asks rhetorically: '"Why," Carlotta wondered, "the House of *Tar*? / Might it have to do with the gross / imports of crude oil Bush will come clean on / only when Tigris comes clean?"' (9). It is of course a remarkable instance of linguistic serendipity that will not go unnoticed by Muldoon that the name of the American president also starts with B.

17 *The Faber Book of Beasts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), xvi.

Muldoon buttresses his criticisms of the Bush regime in public and popular forums too at the time. In the international books of the year columns in the *Times Literary Supplement* in December 2004, Muldoon recommends three books, all related to the war in Iraq: *Gilgamesh* translated by Stephen Mitchell, *House of Bush, House of Sand* by Craig Unger and *The Future Dictionary of America* by more than 170 writers and artists. Two of the entries in the dictionary use scathing Swiftian ire to condemn the verbal obfuscations of apologists for Bush. Two specimen Muldoonisms emerge: 'Condeeluusion:' 'a term once used for a tendency exhibited by high-ranking officials in the George A. Bush regime 1. to have a false impression 2. to convey one (SEE condeesceension).' An illustration of a dancing couple who happily turn their back on each other, 'doing the condoleesy,' visualises the spin and pivots of political rhetoric spearheaded by the unnamed Secretary of State in the Bush administration: Condoleeza Rice. 'Colinoscopy' is defined as 'a term once used for a tendency exhibited by high-ranking officials in the George W. Bush regime to examine their conscience and find it clear. (SEE colinectomy).'[18] Colin Powell, the general and Secretary of State who advocated the invasion of Iraq on false premises to the United Nations, is the obvious originator of Muldoon's coinage for exonerative diagnosis and surgical removal of conscience. The two terms are as hilarious as they are mordant. They might be the best popular examples of the creative and critical arsenal of Muldoon's neologisms and they illustrate vividly the constructive functions of his generative vocabulary to manifest in new words political phenomena and questionable morals that existent registers do not fully comprehend. Such a submission to the overriding political issue of the day (regardless of its historical and universal importance) nevertheless seems strange in the poetry of an author who has instinctively resisted obvious interventions in active contemporary politics. The concurrence of private anguish and political agendas in *Horse Latitudes* continues one powerful aspect of Muldoon's poetry, but the outspokenness and clear-cut oppositions of parts of this collection, not to mention Muldoon's own vociferous placing of the volume in respect to the political issues of the day, deflate the complex alliances that have previously engendered so much unsettling power in his poetry, particularly in the political debates of Ireland, north and south. Such Bush-bashing might bring Muldoon higher on the Nobel shortlist, but this type of unequivocal critique in straightforward language appears anomalous in a poet who used to question critically all forms of established positions, also the oppositional ones, mainly by equivocation, metaphorical ambiguity and imaginative complexity

18 See Muldoon's entries in Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Dave Eggers, *The Future Dictionary of America* (San Fransisco: McSweeney's Books, 2004), 35–36.

while using a language that always unsettled the event to which it related by questioning its own chosen poetic form and linguistic medium.

Whatever else Muldoon might be – buffoon, prankster, enigma, iconoclast, master of mischief, funambulist of politics – he is also a great elegist. Many of his poems have, through formal experimentation and linguistic iconoclasm, given new life to dead persons, for example the Irish navvies in 'The Loaf' and the stillborn in 'The Stoic' (MSG, 37, 47), his father Patrick Muldoon in 'The Coney' (MTB, 3), his partner Mary Farl Powers and his mother in 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow' (*AC*, 13–29, 39–189). This volume is dedicated to Maureen Muldoon, the poet's sister who died of cancer in 2005, like their mother did in 1973, and Farl Powers in 1992. Her fate runs like metastasis through the themes, poems and linguistic features of the volume, most noticeably in 'Turkey Buzzards,' 'Hedge School' and the fate of Carlotta in the title poem. 'Sillyhow Stride,' in memory of Muldoon's artistic friend and rock musician who died from lung cancer in 2003, also takes its place in Muldoon's catalogue of commemoration. In the fray of personal tragedy, historical massacres and contemporary global politics, the strong focus on horses functions as an alienation device to question the absurdities of human existence. However, meditative solemnity, more than outrage and accusation, characterises this interrogation. Muldoon has previously employed a large catalogue of beasts to question forcefully social order, identity, poetic symbolism, linguistic representation and aesthetic concepts; but in this volume they mainly appear well groomed, picturesque and pleasing – with the clear exception of the violent and unrestrainable war horses in 'Glaucus.' Within Muldoon's own idiolect and tradition of restive quadrupeds, these beasts appear artistically domesticated in 'Horse Latitudes.'

Muldoon's capacity for the stygian of the human mind and civilisation also characterises his many bird poems, such as 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003' and 'Turkey Buzzards' in this volume. Probably, due to all their connotations of song, other-language, up-lift and flight, birds tend to retain a closer connection with poetry than other creatures creatures. Muldoon's aviary, however, contains the same originality and complexity as his mammals and biological plants; no larks, nightingales or swans appear. *The Birds*, Muldoon and Richard Martin's version of Aristophanes' eponymous comedy, gives the whole tradition of romantic bird metaphoricity a solid send-up in its hilarious linguisticisation of birds, such as 'merganservant,' 'ombirdsman,' 'birdnik,' 'supergrouse' and 'bard,' and of politics of all kinds in 'Nebulbulfast.'[19] *The Conference of Birds*, also known as *The Speech of Birds*, the extensive Sufi poem by the Persian poet Attar of Nishapur in which birds of all feathers come together to

19 Muldoon and Martin, *The Birds*, 8, 42–47.

decide who is to become their king, augments the metaphorical and contextual implications of the bird poems. Two of the bird poems in *Horse Latitudes* are of a dark and tragic quality. Starlings and buzzards are as common to the Eastern as the Western hemisphere. In 'Turkey Buzzards,' Muldoon's elegy for his sister Maureen's death by cancer in 2005, the most wide-spread species of the carnivorous vultures on the American continents symbolises the menace of mortal disease, the disintegration and death of Maureen, and the Promethean fate of distress and sorrow to family and friends. Nevertheless, the buzzards also represent a poetry and language that lift to a higher dimension the miseries of human life. The hundred-line sentence running through twenty-five quatrains enforces the theme of aesthetic transcendence of mortality. Its continuity and length imply the span and completion of a full life, and the aesthetic achievement of art that extends the past life into poetic longevity. The sentence's circular composition – the first and last lines are the same – returns a metaphysical verdict on the recurrent seasons of life, and on the infinite cycles of death: the utter vanity of the human condition. The sentence, like its two buzzards, soars on its own uplift – a linguistic creation that is emphasised by the visual configuration of the double set of bi- and tetrametric lines in each quatrain as two hovering vultures. In a larger context, this poem is poised in the balance between song and suffering – how the poetic artifice reaches some of its highest moments from the deepest human misery. Suffering, pain, death and destruction prevail so strongly in the poem that the grave human concerns eclipse a couple of other implications: the clampdown of mindless critics upon creative arts and an Adornian admonition of culture vultures in the sphere of arts. A similar darkness and uplift also shadow 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003.' This poem appears after 'Turkey Buzzards,' like two wings of the same poetic bird. The two ornithological poems are also connected by their single-sentence composition and their ornithomorphic qualities. Dark, gloomy, singing and scavenging, and with an inclination to flight and collectivity, the starlings and vultures share with the night-revelling youth much of the same situation and fate. They eat, drink and sing, but they may also be cut down by terminal disease or end up as soldiers or victims of war.

Horse Latitudes is a powerful volume. Its verses balance the gravity of individual disease and death with historical massacres and grand political issues. They also attend to the quotidian and the ordinary, perhaps nowhere more convincingly than in the low-key 'It Is What It Is.' Family fates of playful children and dead parents interlace here with artistic self-reflection: 'The fifty years I've spent trying to put it together' (49). Few poets explore the wretchedness of war and violence, disease and death, and the mysteries of verse with greater virtuosity and confidence than Muldoon. Nevertheless, at present, his

art appears threatened by his own powers. Perhaps there is a sense, in the way this volume crowns Muldoon's achievement, that the bestiality and hybridity of *Mules*, the enigmatic departures of *Why Brownlee Left*, the many transfigurations and unintelligibilities of *Quoof*, the cultural explorations of *Meeting the British*, and, not least, the attention to the unrealised and unknown in *Madoc* and *Hay*, offered more unbridled rawness and made more havoc in its critical reception than this confrontation of human tragedy by means of a more secure situatedness in language and form. In its refined bellelettristic composition, in its range of knowledge and registers, and in its mellifluous swirling of sonnets, songs and pitch-perfect prosody, the collection excels most standards of poetry, but perhaps it falls slightly short of Muldoon's previous unexpected rawness.[20]

Horses, Shklovsky's primary source of strangeness and defamiliarisation, are of many different kinds, and they play in many fields. In a comment in the 1980s upon the undifferentiated perception of the poetry of Heaney and Muldoon by English critics, Edna Longley queried whether the two poets resembled each other like Chinamen in the view of outsiders. John Carey joins the race of distinguishing the two in 'The Stain of Words' – an alarmingly antilingual title – his review in 1987 of Heaney's *The Haw Lantern* and Muldoon's *Meeting the British*: 'You could scarcely pick two poets more unlike.' His review leaves little doubt about where to place your cultural capital:

> Inevitably, comparison tells against Muldoon, reputable and gifted though he is. Heaney's poetry seems unforced, deep, natural – loping along effortlessly lengths ahead of the field. Muldoon's is tricky, clever, tickled by its own knowingness. The difference is that between a Derby winner and a pantomime horse.[21]

Certainly, despite all the misguided and contentious judgements in Carey's review, Heaney and Muldoon's combative sodality of imagination constitutes an indelible watermark of their achievement.[22] Consequently, it seems

20 For Muldoon's own comments on the horses, politics, death and life in this volume, see Paul Muldoon, 'Horse Latitudes,' *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, no. 210 (2006), 5.

21 Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' 56.

22 Muldoon and Heaney sustained a life-long friendship. Muldoon was one of the pallbearers and he gave the eulogy in Heaney's funeral: 'The Beauty of Seamus Heaney,' (YouTube, 2013). Muldoon comments upon his friendship with Heaney and Carey's review in an interview in 2010: 'Seamus and I have been friends since 1968. I was 16 when I met him and he was 28, so we were both fairly young. Our relationship is loving, I'm proud to say. It's survived a lot of drama, most of it drummed up. When my first book was being published,

appropriate and not coincidental that the two compatriots rested their associations with Faber to publish special issues of their latest work almost simultaneously with Enitharmon Press – an entirely different arena, away from critics and public attention. This independent fine arts press, renowned for high quality collaborations between visual artists and writers, provides another setting and lends a different significance to the contestatory companionship of the two fellow poets. Seamus Heaney and Hughie O'Donoghue's *The Testament of Cresseid* was published in a total number of 475 copies – 100 in a *de luxe* and 375 in a regular edition, both including 25 *hors commerce* copies – and Muldoon's *Medley for Morin Kuhr* in an edition of 200 copies including 25 *hors commerce*, all at very unusual prices.[23] Excellence, exclusivity and premium value are clearly the key words. The choice of press testifies to both writers' reverence for the visual arts and to their extensive transdisciplinary co-operation with other artists, and reveals the importance of visual work as a source of inspiration, while hinting at the many ekphrastic poems in their own work. In other respects, Enitharmon – Blake's figure of spiritual beauty and poetic inspiration – might indicate the Romantic strain in parts of their work, Heaney's more than Muldoon's. Similarly, these exquisite editions stand in juxtaposition to Heaney's commitment to his community and Muldoon's engagement with popular culture. At any rate, the exclusivity signals an appreciation

for example, our joint editor at Faber's made me change the title of it from 'The Electric Orchard' to 'New Weather,' so it would seem like an ironic comment on 'Wintering Out,' Seamus's book of the previous year. My present editor at Faber's has yet to alert me formally that Seamus and I have had books appearing within the octave. That's happened several times and it's given an opportunity to reviewers to compare and contrast, usually in Seamus's favour. It results in a simpleton like John Carey acting in bad faith and appearing on BBC television to repeat a view he first shared with us in 1987. To think that generations of Oxford students were 'taught' by this poor fellow! In general, though, Seamus has taken a few knocks for this new book, including some nasty ad hominem stuff in the *New York Times*. So while something tells me we'll never appear in the same season again, in either the UK or the US, I don't really mind one way or the other. We're sort of in it together and I'll love him always.' Prospero, 'The Q & A: Paul Muldoon, Poet,' *The Economist*, 6 October 2010, http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2010/10/new_poetry, accessed 25 April 2019.

Muldoon writes in an earlier poem:

Three things that are hairy and scary:
the curs of Gorey
the curse of Carey
the course of Gowrie.

'Triad,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 May 1995, 13.

23 Seamus Heaney and Hughie O'Donoghue, *The Testament of Cresseid* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2004).

of poetry away from its ordinary trade edition currency and the overlap in timing and choice of press yet again shows the careers of the two Ulster poets running in a somewhat parallel course. In their comprehensive relations to familiar fictions, the Irish context, the Western Canon and World Literature, one symptomatic difference between the two – which their other publications confirm – is Heaney's confluence with and Muldoon's contravention of traditions. Muldoon's *Medley for Morin Kuhr* presents a new sonnet-symphony from the master of prosody, pain and irony that displays many of the Irish-American and Princeton professor's typical poetic strategies and thematic concerns. Nevertheless, this well composed and stylistically secure collection tends to lack some of the apprehension, disturbance and unexpectedness that have so far charged his artistic achievement. By contrast, the Nobel Laureate's version of Henryson's poem prolongs his cultivation of the canon and his involvement with translations. Muldoon's medley reaches far and wide in intertextuality, strategies, stylistics and geography; Heaney's translation is tight and singular in scope. The cover of *The Testament of Cresseid* is dark green, an evocation of natural phenomena and Irish matters. Muldoon's *Medley for Murin Kuhr* presents an irregular red pattern against a background of green folds that initiates many of the medley's preoccupations in its allusions to clashes of naive hope and raw experience, to blood-soiled ground, and to matters of the Emerald Isle. While the political frequently outweighed the individual in Heaney's poetry and prose up to the nineties, *The Testament of Cresseid* favours the personal over the public. While the idiosyncratic and the indirect frequently overshadowed the political in Muldoon's poetry up to the twentieth century, *Medley for Murin Kuhr* is aligned more directly with the political. Over the last few years Heaney has come close to acting as the poetic wing of Amnesty International. *The Testament of Cresseid* balances his Celtic heritage with classical culture through its exploration of individual fate in the aftermath of war. Over the last few years Muldoon has come close to acting as the poetic critic of America's international relations policies. *Medley for Murin Khur* approaches directly the American politics of war while it at the same time incorporates historical battles on the British Isles with a certain emotional detachment and artistic insouciance. Both books challenge the tendency to label uncritically Muldoon an ahistorical and apolitical aesthete, and Heaney a community-committed artist burdened by history. Together they chart in complementary fashion some of the poetic orientations and human dilemmas of local communities – in Ireland, Northern Ireland, America and elsewhere – that evolve from the formations of a problematic history into the possibilities of an increasingly international future.

Muldoon's poetry has nothing to do with 'the stain of words,' the stigmata Carey applies to Muldoon's artistic achievement (nor does Heaney's, of course).[24] Carey is flogging a dead horse; he vainly advances the idea of language as a process 'to return us from words to things' and a lifeless conduit for the already known and felt where 'private suffering' 'is turned into words we can all use for our own griefs.'[25] The idea that language turns objects, phenomena and emotions as much as it can 'return us from words to things,' the idea that language turns in circles around the limited vocabulary 'we can all use,' the idea that there might be ways of expressing grief that have yet to be invented and that griefs 'beyond our own' (whose?) might be unknown to us, and the idea that grief might be different from individual to individual and from culture to culture, appear not to occur to Carey. These ideas all come creatively and logically, perhaps even naturally, to Muldoon's poetry. His language expands language as well as mind and lives – whether by joy, anger or frustration – of an increasing number of readers, but obviously he does not strike a chord with a critic like Carey.

Horse Latitudes, the title that creates puzzlement and curiosity from two well-known words, spurs its own frames of meaning, interpretation and language. For a poetry volume that continues Muldoon's hyper-conscious scrutiny of multitudinous forms and functions of language, this book contains fewer titles that draw attention to their own language than previous volumes. 'Riddle,' 'At Least They Were Not Speaking French' and 'Perdu' do, and at least two of them, possibly all three, point to French language and culture – traditions from the continent across the Atlantic that are left behind or possibly jettisoned in the crossings of place and time. 'Riddle' plays pranks with letters and language, but its implications add to our perception of Muldoon's poetry as imbued with linguistic ideas and the structures of language. Indirectly, the poem also comments upon controversial political issues, and the language of codes and reticence that frequently shields urgent issues from open debate. 'Riddle' works as a tongue-in-cheek response to critics who have labelled Muldoon the unserious wizard of word play; it is the type of poem that would annoy Carey (and many others before Muldoon's poetry expanded the understanding and framework for its own reception and interpretation). The poem's setting of buccaneers and trading suits the collection's title, as well as its many shifts of context and meaning. Furthermore, the buccaneer's world on the margins of law and society sounds strangely akin to our current situation of abuse of power,

24 Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' 56.

25 Ibid.

challenges to democracy and the risks to constitutional integrity posed by unscrupulous politicians and vested interests. Current political idioms and the language of negotiation overlap with the lingo and conduct of buccaneers: 'Just because I've a heart of steel / doesn't mean I don't *feel*' (76). Parrots exist in both worlds: 'the cockatoo / who'll wait as long for a word from me as I'll wait for a word from you' (77). This final line sounds uncannily familiar to today's political world of international diplomacy, duplicity and coded silence. One of the answers to Muldoon's riddle is griddle – the utensil for sieving and baking that imply the separation and sifting of the whole into smaller and cleaner units before the processing into the final product. The making of poetry is here cast in terms of the processes of baking and mining. With its demonstration of the difference caused by the single letters and how their absence constructs entirely new meanings, as seen in the fall from 'the ideal' to 'the raw deal' (76), the poem's alphabetic sleight of hand is redolent of deconstructive approaches well-known from the Left Bank and Parisian circles. The poem exhibits a dual tendency to connect and disconnect the linguistic threads of meaning. Such a play with letters inevitably signifies more than just a displacement of phonemes and alphabetic signs. First of all, the poem shifts its focus from lofty ideas to the nitty-gritty details of the single letter, from grand narratives to the language in which they are presented, from 'the ideal' to 'the raw deal.' Secondly, the poem points to the outer regions of law, and comments obliquely on the possible personal interests and double standards of agents/agencies, democracy and constitutional law. Thirdly, this refined deconstructive poetic product illustrates the significance of Derridean philosophy in Muldoon's poetry, and enacts indirectly a very unpopular strand in American history, life, language and intellectual critique, perhaps more since the turn of the millennium than ever before: French.

Where 'Riddle' evokes implicitly metropolitan sophistication and French culture, 'Chiraqui' does so extremely directly. 'Chiraqui,' is 'a term once used for anyone exhibiting anti-Bush sentiments, particularly high-ranking French officials,' as Muldoon writes in his third entry in *The Future Dictionary of America*.[26] To listen to or to express anything that smacks of the ideas or politics of French politicians, here obviously embodied by the President of France from 1995–2007, Jacques Chirac, is tantamount to political harakiri in America around the turn of the millennium. Muldoon's hilarious coinage, just like his two other entries 'colinoscopy' and 'condeelusion,' firmly intervenes in the public debate at the time on the politics of the Bush precidency, and its differences from the French in how to approach Iraq and the regime of Saddam

26 Foer, Krauss, and Eggers, *The Future Dictionary of America*, 30.

Hussein. Although Muldoon's poetic and political idioms sometimes overlap in *Horse Latitudes*, his dictionarial wit and creative lambency also differ considerably. 'At Least They Were Not Speaking French' keeps up the same dialogue as 'Riddle' and 'Chiraqui,' and takes its point of departure from linguistic idioms and grand conversation. French, together with Gaelic, Latin and German, holds a distinct position in Hiberno-Anglo Ireland, in its history, culture, language and literature, as the many interactions with and adaptations of and translations from French in the poetry of Muldoon, Ciaran Carson and Derek Mahon remind us.[27] Muldoon's equivocal title records this tradition while at the same time it accounts for the unpopular position of French culture and ideas in many segments of Anglo-American society. Obviously, the title plays on the stock phrase for bad language 'Pardon my French.' Conventionally, this excuse posits in commonsensical usage French as profane, lascivious, effeminate, contrived, frilly and silly in contrast to supposedly Anglophone values which are, in this stereotypical view, more religious, moral, masculine, authentic, pure and wise. Yet the poem also recounts a distrust of French culture that runs through the history, philosophy and language of England and America – a distrust that has reached new heights since the turn of the millennium. Derrida, one of the most distinct and established critical French voices in America over several decades, defines and advocates for the French position as follows:

> Right now, the French and German governments are trying, timidly, to slow down or temper the hastiness or overzealousness of the United States, at least with respect to certain forms this 'war on terrorism' might take. But little heed is taken here to voices coming from Europe. The major television networks speak only of the unconditional and enthusiastic

27 For some encounters with French literature and culture in Muldoon's poetry, see 'Paris' (*M*, 40); 'Meeting the British' and 'Sushi' (*MTB*, 16, 33); all the poems named after French philosophers in *Madoc*; 'Paul Valéry: *Pomegranates*' (*MSG*, 24); 'Charles Emile Jacque: *Poultry Among Trees*' and 'Camille Pissarro: *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte* (*OTTWK*, 14–21, 97). Carson engages with French poetry in *From Elsewhere* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2014); *In the Light Of* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2012); *The Alexandrine Plan* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998). Mahon has shown himself to be an accomplished translator of French poetry and drama in *Adaptations* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2006); *Cyrano De Bergerac* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2004); *The Selected Poems of Phillipe Jacottett* (New York: Viking, 1988); *The Chimeras* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1982). For two recent collections of essays on the exchanges between Irish and French literature and culture, see Anne Goarzin, ed. *New Critical Perspectives on Franco-Irish Relations* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015); Eamon Maher, Grace Neville, and Eugene O'Brien, eds., *Modernity and Postmodernity in a Franco-Irish Context* (Oxord: Peter Lang, 2008).

> support of England and Tony Blair beside the United States. France should do more and do better, it seems to me, to make an original voice heard.[28]

Muldoon, who previously reviewed Patricia Craig's *The Rattle of the North* as influenced by 'the recent attempt to establish a post-Barthes, or "Londonderridian" canon of Irish "writing"' and wrote poems on Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva in his parapostmodernist monstrosity *Madoc*, is, like so many other critical voices in the contemporary English-speaking world, highly aware of the French tradition in current international discourse, and the reservations towards it that have been standardised by the euphemism for bad language, 'Pardon my French.'[29] All three sonnet stanzas start and end with this title phrase in a poem that accounts for family disease and social activism, and in which the recurrent phrase indicates a deeper disdain for the sick and the socially deprived. Repetition of lines and the recurrent refrain of '*fol-de rol fol-de rol fol-de ro-di-do* emphasise an atmosphere of vanity, insanity and circularity. Again, Muldoon spins an achieved, many-angled poem on the hardships and inclemency of life to criticise without self-pity thoughtless attitudes and social malformations including language itself, this time in the guise of a juxtaposed expression of a common idiom and grand narratives. Refrains and roundels, in the volume as in this poem, also overlap with long-standing French traditions. A further Muldoonian strategy along these Gallic lines is seen in all the words in French and of French origin that he incorporates into his English, often with a sense of the chic and the modern, but always with mixed connotations of popularity and ridicule, and of the multidiscursive, the *autrui* and the elsewhere: 'Gauloise' (7), 'fanfaron' (9), 'chevaux-de-friese' (10), 'fontanelle' (16), 'traduction' (17), 'Blanche' (22), 'banquette' (28), 'mont-de-piété,' 'pig in a poke' and '*boucherie*' (30), '*Nostalgie de la / boue la boue la boue la boue* / an all-Ireland fleadh' (69), 'flageolet' (69), '("*les ans, mon ange, les anges manqués*")' (93), 'cordon sanitaire' (103). The words serve multiple purposes of rhyme, rhythm, irony, alienation, surprise, humour, fun, *le mot juste*, allusion and reference. French phrase, form and lexicon in this volume intimate the contribution to Anglo-American language and culture that is frequently taken for granted or overlooked or euphemistically frowned upon: 'Pardon my French.'

'Perdu' takes a different tack on the French position. A borrowing from French – more specifically from middle French in which *perdu* (*perdue* in

28 Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 119.

29 Paul Muldoon, 'Canon and Colcanon,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 October 1992, 22.

feminine singular form), the past participle of *perdre*, means, more or less like in English, lost or perished, and often occurs in connection with the extremely hazardous position of *sentinelle perdu* – the word draws attention to its own un-Englishness, particularly to French-speaking people. Its title, situation and incumbent questions of justice interact directly with Heaney's 'Mycenae Lookout,' but also relates to his 'Punishment,' 'The Strand at Lough Beg,' 'Casualty,' and 'Station Island.' In Muldoon's poem 'a Salish man' and his son face the grim fate of war, torture and death as the lookouts of their besieged community:

> The grave already held two powder kegs
> and I came to as they were breaking my legs.
>
> They were breaking my legs so I would fit
> when I came to and called for an end to it.
>
> An end to the ration of bread and beer
> and the rationale for having dropped me here.
>
> They dropped me here still bloody from the "scratch"
> I might have got from a shadowy Sasquatch. (85)

The Indian sentinel and his son – "'Tell the buriers to bury me with you'" (85) – are already condemned to perdition; their community is probably destined to go the same way. Torture, murder and massacre are covered up in deceitful language, 'scratch,' and the responsibility for the atrocity dissolves in a mythological monster, 'Sasquatch.' These verses of violence are resonant with the fate of the last member of the extinct Yahi tribe in the civilisatory elegy 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi' in Muldoon's debut volume, *New Weather*. They, thus, belong to Muldoon's Amerindian alterratives, but the wars of the West in the Middle East and Asia offer a far more immediate hermeneutical context for the poem than Northern Ireland after The Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The symbolic significance of syntax that Muldoon established so powerfully in *Moy Sand and Gravel* adds an insistent dimension of justice to 'Perdu.' Eleven end-stopped couplets unite the fate of father and son, and capture the binary deadlock of one culture being brutally extinguished by another. Sameness in the first and final couplet creates a double sense of adamant resolve and repetitive inevitability. Chains of linked phrases unite the terms in the second line of each stanza with the first line in the next and copper-fasten the concatenation of logic, and possibly the pedestrian routines and rhythms of one victim following another. Simplistic rhymes and rudimentary vocabulary, by Muldoon's

own standards, enhance the miasma of atavism and brutishness. 'Perdu,' in typical Muldonic funambulism, withholds any explicit sentence on the rationale and justification of the situation in the poem, but its title, poetic technique, linguistic arsenal and syntax more than suggest that imperatives of human rights and ordinary standards of law and order are no longer at risk: they are totally lost and gone.

The volume's personal trauma and public issues are intimately interwoven in the language of the one-sentence sonnet 'Hedge School.' The term 'hedge school' refers to the alternative rural school system in Ireland for the poor and the dispossessed, mainly Catholics, during several centuries of suppression by the Penal Laws, in which numerous paragraphs were designed to force Irish children to avail themselves of the colonial power's established school system, mainly Protestant. Hedge schools provided learning, but also figured largely as an organisation of national opposition and cultural defiance, as Daniel Corkery describes them in *Hidden Ireland,* and Brian Friel presents their culture so vividly in *Translations*.[30] 'Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore,' Heaney writes in 'Glanmore Sonnet II,' and goes on to explain in personal and romanticised language: 'Glanmore truly was what I called it, a "hedge school" in the literal sense. I gathered blackberries off the briars and ate them, as if I were back on the road to school. I even found a blackbird nest in the hedge at our gable.'[31] The hedge schools enacted a centuries strong tradition in Ireland of learning, resistance and cultural consolidation. Muldoon evokes and identifies with this tradition from year '673,' when 'another Maelduin was bishop,' via his 'great-great-grandmother' in a '*Papish*' hedge school, to his daughter in 'her all-American Latin class' (94) in his 'Hedge School.' An introductory negational phrase, 'Not only,' sets a dark and sombre mood for the themes in this single, convoluted sonnet sentence that reflects the love and complexities of education. The poem also accounts for the person's – most likely Muldoon himself – autodidactic research into the '*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*' for illumination on the word *'metastasis*' in relation to his 'dear Sis.' Muldoon's poem highlights the hedge school, the American high school and the *Oxford English Dictionary* as institutions of education, while at the same time subscribing to an understanding of education that extends beyond the confines of institutions. Where the institutions in the poem provide

30 Daniel Corkery, *Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, [1924] 1967); Friel, *Translations*. See also P.J. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (Cork: The Mercier Press, [1968] 1997).

31 Heaney, *Field Work*, 34. 'Seamus Heaney Home Place,' https://www.seamusheaneyhome.com/what-s-on/special-exhibition-the-hedge-school-at-glanmore/, accessed 17 April 2019.

instruction in philology, the humanities and much general knowledge, the school of life provides harsher lessons in the shape of mortal disease and the violation of human rights. The persona's memories of his grandmother blend with his reflections upon his daughter's classes on Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and how she 'may yet be forced to conjugate / *Guantánamo, amas, amat*,' at the same time as he traces 'the root of *metastasis*' (94). Language, fundamental to education, highlights itself by italics, citation, Latin, slang and syntax. The constellation of '*Guantánamo*, *amas, amat*' in the same line appears strikingly incongruous. Italicisation and the chimes of the last syllable –'*amo* with '*amas*' and '*amat*' – join together the aborigine word for 'land between rivers' and 'sea existence,' Guantánamo, now ubiquitously synonymous with the contested penal policies of the controversial naval station, and the first words many students of Latin will learn, the conjugations of 'I love,' 'You love' – words and associations that would otherwise be extremely unlikely to appear in same sentence. Its implication that the military interrogation centre directs the conjugations of the Latin word for love, suggests how the politics and discourses of Guantánamo precipitate changes in language. Such Muldoonesque conjugations bring unexpectedly together two distinctively different terms, and reverses many of their set associations. Love – of family, country, ideals – bears upon Guantánamo. Conversely, fixed paradigms and forced recitation confine the teaching of philology. Many prisoners and officers at the detention centre have in common their families, a sense of their home country and sets of ideals in which they believe, despite the gravitation towards dissimilarity, opposition and conflict in the place. Conversely, the teaching of humanities in many schools and the management of education are subject to conformist teaching methods and imposed regulations. Authority and control circumscribe the ideas of enlightenment and liberty normally associated with education: social, religious and ideological structures stigmatise the hedge school, force is an element in high school and dictionaries exercise control over language. Questions of who and what direct education, institutions and school systems surround the more specific situations in the poem itself and these verses indicate a coherence between structures of education and strictures of imprisonment. Education, as Gramsci advocated so convincingly in his *Prison Notebooks*, needs to foster the critical awareness and transformational competence of the individual, not a school system that functions as one of the main pillars in the ideological hegemony of preserving the status quo of a flawed society. Such principles of education serve the preservation of democracies, as much as they fuel radical and counter-hegemonic movements. In the proverbial colloquialism of freedom fighters only the rivers run free and prisons amount to universities of freedom. The Irish hedge

school provided exactly that kind of education, as did The Maze and Robben Island. Muldoon is not pleased with the current situation of education: 'It's hard to know how to deal with the crisis that faces education in the US. Maybe poetry is a place to start!'[32] 'Hedge School' was first published in the *New York Times* in June 2004 as a poetic intervention in the public discourses that seem continuously to reach new heights of euphemism, doublespeak and languistic obfuscation in what appears to be part of a re-schooling of the established understanding of human rights principles, constitutional privileges and international jurisdiction. Neoliberalism seems a smaller problem than the conversion of ex-liberals to these pernicious shifts in discourse.

To maintain human decency and international rights appears to be increasingly difficult in many corners of the Western world. 'The Mountain is Holding Out' (87–8) reads like a parable of the last stand. This parable, variously interpreted, relates as much, perhaps even more, to the situation of the humanities within today's universities as to the position of universities in today's society. In Muldoonian manner it is tempting to point out that Princeton can be rhymed vicariously with prison. For all its resonance with centres of detention and seats of learning, 'Hedge School' also attends to education as lessons of life beyond knowledge and intellectual empowerment. 'Dear Sis' turns the focus in the volta from institutional education and public crisis to individual life and medical emergency: *metastasis*. The poem strikes an unsettling note by implicitly asking to what extent knowledge and education can possibly prepare for personal crisis and the afflictions of the human condition, or, in grander jargon: how epistemology relates to ontology. Yet, as so often in Muldoon's poetry, these verses overcome such unsettling notes in their aesthetic power and wisdom, and through the transformative powers of language. Metastasis is the medical term for a disease, primarily cancer, that spreads to a different part of the body from where it originated. The medical term enables a better understanding of the patient's predicament, and references the advanced expertise that frequently cures the patient. Furthermore, the term is metastatic itself, as 'tracing the root' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes clear. Of multiple origins, partly a borrowing from Latin and partly a borrowing from Greek, its meaning has now metastasised almost entirely into the medical sphere. Its general meaning of transformation from one condition to the other becomes outdated by the day and its sense of rapid transition from one type of figure to another is virtually lost already. Interestingly, the dictionary links metastasis

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32 Prospero, 'The Q & A: Paul Muldoon, Poet,' http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2010/10/new_poetry, accessed 25 April 2019.

directly to the obsolete term 'retortion,' the action of responding to an argument by using its originator. Muldoon's poem, along the lines of OED definitions and etymology, is metastatic. His transmuted sonnet records in a single sentence, which changes from clause to clause, the originary process of education from multiple origins through altering conditions, to turn the arguments and logic of current media discourse against their own originators. The juxtaposition of cancer, education and Guantánamo in 'Hedge School' suggests that the school system and the prison camp suffer from serious disease, and raises the question whether or not they can be cured in time before they enter a fatal and terminal phase.

Horse Latitudes continues Muldoon's engagement with language. After the liberation of language from the confines of history, geography, the speaking subject and referentiality, the arbitrary motions of letters and signs of language have roamed, like Shklovsky's horses, across the fields of critical interpretation and public debate. The French connection, particularly Derrida's language philosophy, still enables critical resistance towards overriding discourses. A metastatic language of uncertain origins and false mythologies also enacts the processes of terminal cancer. Its many deconstructive features also serve to undermine the predominant rhetoric of political oppression and the propaganda of war – a grim global situation that Adorno would easily recognise. Muldoon is very adept at such semiosis. Still, the development of Muldoon's poetic language moves in a constructive direction. His consciousness of the structure of the sentence that came to prominence in *Moy Sand and Gravel* still serves a large number of syntactic and metaphorical functions in *Horse Latitudes*. Muldoon's sentence has become another hallmark of his poetic language.

CHAPTER 11

Maggot

'Like the whorl of an out-of-this-world ear…,' (74) run the first words of the one-sentence, four-stanza sign-centered sonnet '@.' The most fluorescent language poem in *Maggot* appears as a very apposite sign of what can be termed Muldoonian 'p@stmodernism.' The term signals mainly post-Madoc poems in Muldoon's poetry, from e.g. 'Crossing the Line' and 'The Plot' to several in this volume, which engage with the ethical consequences of what appears to be merely an issue of linguistic or technical interest. '@' swirls with four subordinate clauses that never amount to a sentence in a very enigmatic, language-conscious 'hacked' sonnet that, in keeping with our digital era, reflects upon the history and consequences of new media. Undoubtedly, the digital reformation of the last few decades has entailed serious ethical dilemmas for our civilisation, dilemmas not unique to the current epoch of WikiLeaks, the Snowden case and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which have put these issues before the general public in unprecedented ways. Other poems in the volume delve more directly, i.e. in terms of Muldoonian language, into Adornian aspects of existential darkness. Lines like 'Who knew that *humus* might lie beneath "humane"?' (65) and 'Maybe you'll give me a sign?' (73), for example, present two discrete sentences from the murder investigations in 'The Humors of Hakone' and the war, siege and starvation in 'Love Poem with Pig.' They highlight yet again the confluence of language and dark themes in Muldoon's poetic language. The language in Muldoon's eleventh volume in 2010 is still extraordinary, conspicuous and conducive to speculation on the human condition, way beyond Kennedy-Andrew's binary evaluation that sees Muldoon as an 'emotionally evasive joker' who displays, nevertheless, a 'profound ethical seriousness.'[1] Self-reflexive quips and questions with ethical, existential and metaphysical depth, such as those quoted above, appear throughout the volume. Etymological detours, homonymic serendipity, subtle sound distributions, abstruse sonnets, circular sentences and semiotic superabundance, just to mention a few phenomena, still mark his poetry. Many titles, from the opening 'Plan B' via 'Nope,' 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett,' 'Ohrwurm,' '@,' 'Lines for the Quatercentenary of the Voyage of the Halve Maen' to 'Yup' and 'Balls,' attract attention to letters, slang, syntactic units, other languages, signs, bawdiness, polysemantic undecidability and

1 Kennedy-Andrews, 'Introducing Paul Muldoon: "Arbitrary and Contrary,"' 5.

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many other linguistic phenomena that creep and crawl, hop and stop, fly and flutter in and across most poems in the volume, including the poems without titles that flag their linguistic experimentation. Metaphorically, beasts and birds also suggest Muldoonian language, sentence, form and matter – not least the titular maggot. And as a beast of alienation and estrangement, maggots compare unfavorably with horses and tend to turn Shklovsky's defamiliarising horses into apparently loveable pets.

Maggot is strikingly evocative and suggestive. The highly metaphoric and phonetically hard-hitting bi-syllabic titular word, which chimes in Muldoonian fashion with *Madoc* and *Mules* in more manners than sound, crawls and curls with a plethora of hermeneutic possibilities, both in general terms and in specifically lingual litheness. *Maggot* engages, like *Madoc*, with larger narratives by tangential method, and continues the bestiary from *Mules*. Horses from Muldoon's previous volume *Horse Latitudes* are given a rest for a spacious vista of zoological specimens: dolphins, porcupines, hares, pigs, insects, elephants and circus animals, and, of course, maggots. An aviary consisting of albatross, quail, geese and humming birds expands the imagery of bird poems from the previous collection. Ideas of conference and speech of birds now extend to the social cackle and technological twitter and tweets of our technological age. Many of these zoological and ornithological poems testify to Muldoon's statement of beasts and birds in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Beasts* that 'it seems that in poetry, as in life, animals bring out the best in us.'[2] Many of these beastly poems testify to the contrary; most of them testify to both. The title and poems in *Maggot* are equally suggestive as those in *Horse Latitudes*, although two more dissimilar creatures can hardly be found in nature. Yet they frequently meet at the end of the races, at the end of the day: maggot wriggles as a repulsive *memento mori*. As the great equaliser and the minister of rot and decay, maggot also exerts its mouldy influences throughout the volume. Where *Horse Latitudes* reeled towards disease and death, *Maggot* gravitates towards death and aftermath. Although most poems entertain ambiguities of vitality and mortality, impressions of doom, destruction, death and decay prevail in many: 'Moryson's Fancy,' 'Fish Ladder,' 'Maggot,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'The Sod Farm,' 'Another Porcupine,' 'Wayside Shrines.' Nevertheless, the volume, again with great ambiguity, also pulsates with what the blurb terms a Yeatsian inspiration for 'sex and the dead,' and a typically more Muldoonesque 'extravagant linkage of rot and the erotic.' Indeed, very few of these poems, metaphors, words, sentences, pleasures and displeasures of the text come without life-giving potency and morbid drives. From explicit titles and

2 Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Beasts*, xv.

lines – 'The Fling,' 'Balls,' 'Love Poem with Pig,' 'on my hands and knees to nuzzle your but,' (32) 'Commie quim' (49) – to semantic plenitude and metaphorical multiplicity – 'Extraordinary Rendition,' maggot, porcupine, humming birds – the volume variously appears as cocked and erectile as the wild and weird erotics of *New Weather*, *Mules* and *Quoof*.

The sentence still contributes to artistic refinement, to a sense of construction and to indications of ethical purport. 'A Hare at Aldergrove' hops and leaps in lines and sentence, and across many lingual and textual fields.[3] A wh-sentence starts 'Love Poem with Pig' and dependent clauses start other poems. Six of the seven sections in the opening poem, 'Plan B,' spin one sentence poems, as do two (II and IV) of the five sonnets in 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett.' Entire poems, like 'A Christmas in the Fifties,' 'My Lord Byron's Maggot,' 'The Fling,' 'A Mayfly' and 'A Second Humming Bird,' follow suit. Many poems, for example 'Plan B,' 'When the Pie Was Opened,' 'Francois Boucher: Arion on Dolphin,' assume linkage and coherence by repeating the last phrase or sentence at the end of a stanza in the beginning of the next. 'The Fish Ladder,' 'Quail' and all ten sections in 'The Side Project' begin with the reflection of time slipping by, of 'Forty years' elapsing, with echoes of the Belfast Group forty years earlier and its poetics that intersected with Muldoon's poetry, Heaneyspeak and Frostian influence, with a glancing allusion to the biblical exodus. Several poems adopt intricate timespans, not least the temporal planes in 'The Side Project.' All sections of 'The Rowboat' start and end with the same sentence. 'Maggot,' nine sonnets with the same rhyme words in the same order in the same stanzaic composition, starts with 'I used to' to indicate monotony, routine, repetition and change. After the volta, the third stanza runs the same in all sonnets to change temporality, place, perspective and mood: 'where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim' (42–50). Divided and connected, the same arbitrary refrain of love, uncertainty and whimsicality turns up again in a later sonnet: 'Loss of Separation: A Companion.' Muldoon's sense of sounds, structure and sentence is really something else. However artificial or arbitrary some of his critics may

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3 Hares and rabbits hop around in poetry. In contemporary poetry from Northern Ireland, these poems constitute a little sub-genre of their own, one to which Muldoon's earlier poem 'I Remember Sir Alfred' (*WBL*, 18) serves as an important example, and one which this later poem also crosses. 'St Louis pretty much created Eliot's tongue even as he attempted to betray it. I especially see signals of that in *Inventions of the March Hare*, where one also sees the misogynist, the racist,' Muldoon comments upon Eliot's early poetry. Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' 76. For an enormously entertaining and informative essay on the many intricate interpretations of hares and rabbits in the poetics and politics of Belfast, see Brearton, 'Hare and Rabbit,' 64–69.

judge such Muldoonian methods, the ability to mesmerise the reader is still strong. These verbal acrobatics certainly suit their subject matter and, arguably, they add strange melodies and qualities of deft precision and astounding brilliance to his poetry. Phrasal interjections, reiterations of sentences, syntactic parallels and far-reaching correspondences draw our attention to different modes of coherence and interpretational logic that may be said to run across his poems and through his volumes. These wide-ranging modes frequently resist conventional methods of close reading. If a sentence forms a unit for a single thought, this intricate and involved way of thinking poetry creates clusters of themes and ideas that belong together as much as their words or syntax do. That the same word, phrase, sound or sentence might spur an entirely different thought, and an ability to keep two ideas in mind at the same time, play an important part in this technique, as is wryly indicated by such doubled poems as 'Geese' and 'More Geese,' 'A Humming Bird' and 'A Second Humming Bird' and 'A Porcupine' and 'Another Porcupine.' All of these poems construe their language and form in ways that prompt an assessment of contemporary information technology. They also engage with the poetics and politics of the back rooms in Belfast, and with the broader encounters between different cultures. They simultaneously echo and revise the disruptive and discordant syntax that was much more preponderant in his first volumes. Most poems in *Maggot* continue the constructive compositions and ethical implications of *Moy Sand and Gravel*, albeit with much more equivocation and prevarication, and with far less directness than some parts of *Horse Latitudes* and Muldoon's concomitant commentary upon that volume.

In wider terms, both *Horse Latitudes* and *Maggot* situate themselves against the political polemics and hegemonic discourses of their own day in a language and imaginative mysteriousness that transcend these limitations. These verses, as with most of Muldoon's poetry, bear upon posteriority and the past: new futures require transformations in, amongst other things, perceptions of self, of social structures and of national identification, and of the many cognitive structures that contribute to forms of life and being, or to a rediscovery of values that have been waylaid and lost. Imagination and language with a propensity for the aberrant and apparently unintelligible tend to prompt cognition, whereas congealed language and comprehensions of language as mere means of communication and reference ultimately belong more to categories of confirmation. Muldoonesque language is frequently a Teflon language that dares first to look for the next and previous letter, for the new and old rhyme, for the next new transition in tradition and for the next line, clause and sentence– a language that runs unstoppably from remote recesses, a language that dares first to look for italicettes, alterratives, quoofs, horse latitudes and

maggots. Such language affects unpredictably the many valencies with which it interacts, and has more impact than a language derived from secondary reference points and from the atavistic conviction that language is translucent for all people and all purposes. Muldoon's linguistic intelligence and eye for the less utilised parts of the lexicon, and his deployment of non-standard syntax and grammar have, since *Madoc* and *Hay*, taken a slight turn towards the less Muldoonesque although his creative processes are still marked by some recognisable Muldoonisms: 'imarraghes,' 'wonderbirth,' 'the pied,' 'the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible,' 'liminality,' 'narthecality,' 'Londonderridean.'[4] To some extent this shift ensues from the change in critical climate that Muldoon has exerted himself through his poetry, through his essays on literature, and through his professional roles as Princeton professor and poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, alongside a wider acceptance of French theory and approaches to poetry. His previous volumes assist veteran readers in the understanding of new ones and his own essays can always be read in relation to his own creative processes. Institutionalisation and widespread knowledge of post-structuralist theories and deconstructive thought also facilitate insight into and acceptance of the importance of his poetry. The fact that his forms of linguistic introspection have as much bearing as his metaphorical indirection upon ideological formation, political hegemony and public discourses, appears even more evident now than when the Troubles seemed the most immediate context of interpretation. Some of the directness of *Horse Latitudes*, and in the 2004 Book of the Year columns in the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Future Dictionary of America* entries, also served to remind ordinary readers and critical commentators of the frameworks into which his linguistic focus may be said to fit. Whereas strands of *Horse Latitudes* are interwoven with political polemics on the Iraq War and the opposing discourses on this international conflict between the Americans and the French, much of *Maggot* pits itself against political actions and moral dilemmas in the aftermath of that war – with noticeably more poetic hesitancy, metaphorical vagueness and lingual indirection than parts of its preceding volume. In *Maggot*, Muldoon's by now somewhat less alienating tricks and techniques of language make the volume seem more approachable and his evolving treatment of the sentence and symbolic use of syntax provide new possibilities for interpretation.

Reviews of *Maggot* reveal a perception of language more in tune with Muldoon's own dissenting convictions on the characteristics and strengths of language. Nick Laird asserts: 'Muldoon is an authentic poet of the psychoanalytic

4 Muldoon, 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' 113; *To Ireland, I*, 1, 5; 'Canon and Colcannon: Review of *The Rattle of the North* by Patricia Craig,' 22.

error (read "era") who thinks of language as an active agent, signifying at levels below our consciousness.'[5] Laird's acumen aligns itself with several of Muldoon's affirmations (as well as his poem 'Errata'). 'I think one can only be faithful to the language and the way it presents itself to you,' he had told John Haffenden in 1981.[6] Muldoon upholds his reverence for language also in *Maggot*, and provides a rationale for one of his own watermarks in 'The Point of Poetry:' 'The urge to set down words in particular patterns is one of our most basic human impulses.' 'Rhyme is sometimes seen, improperly, as being imposed upon language rather than occurring in quite unforced ways within the language itself.'[7] Muldoon advocates a patterning of language as a vital part of human activity, and understands language, especially rhyme, in ways that are often contentious, even among poets. His linguistic apartness is a main reason for the artistic distinctiveness of his poetry. Laird appreciates Muldoon as 'the most formally ambitious and technically innovative of modern poets, he writes poems like no one else.'[8] Most reviewers, like Laird, comment upon language. Prospero notes that Muldoon still keeps language as the principle parameter for his poetry: '*Maggot*, his 11th book of poetry, finds him once again pushing and inventing new boundaries for language.'[9] Rachel A. Burns explains one interesting feature of Muldoon's submission to language – 'the buoyancy of Muldoon's language overcomes the sobriety of his subjects' – but is mainly more concerned, like so many others, with describing Muldoon's use of language than discussing its points and purposes: 'The energy of Muldoon's language is in part a result of his mixing of contemporary references and slang with a wide range of historical and literary allusions.'[10] Laura Marsh maintains an old depreciative device: 'Esoteric pranks are, increasingly, the fuel for Muldoon's poems.'[11] Josh Cook honours the poems as 'artifices of evocative language that imply much more than they state.'[12] Adam Newey is fascinated by

5 Nick Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon,' *The New York Review*, 23 June 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/06/23/triumph-paul-muldoon/, accessed 27 May 2019.

6 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 133.

7 Muldoon, 'The Point of Poetry,' 503–505.

8 Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon.'

9 Prospero, 'The Q & A: Paul Muldoon, Poet,' http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2010/10/new_poetry, accessed 17 April 2019.

10 Rachel A. Burns, 'Poet Muldoon Mesmerizes with *Maggot*,' *The Harvard Crimson* (2010), http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/9/21/maggot-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

11 Laura Marsh, 'Animality: *Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *New Republic* (2011), https://newrepublic.com/article/79272/maggot-paul-muldoon, accessed 19 April 2019.

12 Josh Cook, '*Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *Bookslut* (2010), http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2010_10_016686.php, accessed 17 April 2019.

'some decidedly spivvy turns of phrase,' and captures many aspects of Muldoon's language in the book:

> In terms of style, the continuity with the earlier book is clear: there's the same glancing, seemingly accidental association of ideas, the hammeringly insistent rhymes, the rapid shifts of diction, from high intellectual arcana to low demotic, and the sense of a teemingly fertile natural world that comes freighted with mythic significance … decidedly spivvy turns of phrase … Well, perhaps Muldoon's ideal reader is as culturally well-resourced as he is; for the rest of us, there's always Google … There's a loose-limbed, gangling quality to these poems, where one idea sparks another seemingly by accident of pun or homophone, or rhyme. It's no accident, of course, because this is a poet who is always firmly in control of where he's going.[13]

The language of Muldoon's poetry has at the time of the publication of *Maggot* in 2010 assumed such importance that it not only becomes an unavoidable aspect of any review, his consistent immersion in language has also fostered changes in views on language as much as views on his own poetry. A more neutral or even positive tone of review has replaced the earlier incomprehension and negative appraisal on the part of some critics. This new tone is reflected in the critical debate on the language of Muldoon's poetry. Nevertheless, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews asserts in his introduction to a collection of critical essays on Muldoon's writing that one of the many questions that reappears in the critical reception of Muldoon's poetry is whether he is 'merely a highly inventive but emotionally evasive joker playing a slippery, virtuous game of words and rhymes and allusions' or a poet 'in which this playfulness and cleverness contributes to profound ethical seriousness?'[14] At a superficial

13 Adam Newey, '*Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Guardian*, 30 October 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/30/paul-muldoon-maggot-review, accessed 17 April 2019.

14 Kennedy-Andrews, *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, 5, 17. Muldoon's language is controversial and Kennedy-Andrews' dilemma encapsulates many previous comments on his language. John Carey has upbraided Muldoon's 'refusal to communicate,' while Alan Holinghurst deems Muldoon's language 'a *tour-de-force*' which leads nowhere 'The Stain of Words,' 56; 'Telling Tales: New Poetry,' 80–85. David Annwn indicates 'linguistic hubris,' 'Review of *Why Brownlee Left* by Paul Muldoon,' *Anglo-Irish Review* 69 (1981), 74–79. John Goodby detects Muldoon's language crisis already in *Mules*, '"Armageddon, Armageddon." Language and Crisis in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1986), 229–236. Derek Mahon explores the idiosyncratic characteristics in Muldoon's poetry in 'Quaat?' 27–28. David Wheatley discusses the dimension of Gaelic in Muldoon's poetry in 'The

level, the question is of some interest, but otherwise this traditional schismatic approach to Muldoon's language is as redundant as it is reductive. Certainly, Muldoon is a highly inventive virtuoso game player with language, but he is not emotionally evasive. First, such a postulation, the traditional one in the reviewing of Muldoon's poetry that Kennedy-Andrews questions, bases its premise on a clear-cut definition of emotionality from which the ludic and the humorous are excluded. Secondly, in like manner, playfulness and cleverness are separated from ethical seriousness, as if the comic and the entertaining were always bright and light and never dark and doom-laden, as if the playful and the clever from Aristophanes and Swift to stand-up comedy and late-night TV-shows never engage(d) with profound ethical dilemmas. Thirdly, the postulation presumes that language is always secondary and translucent and never a primary mover and multifarious shaker itself in the understanding of ethics and the critique of false premises, lies and hypocrisy. Finally, if Muldoon is merely a showman in the shambles, a joker to the king, a comedian in the killing fields, a madcap in the abattoir – which he clearly also is – these roles are crucial to moral concerns and ethical debate.

Muldoon's use of language in *Maggot* engages both humorous and playful qualities, as well as profound and serious elements. 'When the Pie Was Opened' offers a fine example of the use of language that integrates the serious and the ludic. The famous nursery rhyme of the title provides an imaginative point of departure for a multi-associative poem on individual disease, strained human relationships and public concerns. Struggles of everyday life are juxtaposed with classic heroes such as 'Hector, Ajax, Ferdia, Cuchulainn,' but the serious matter and epic reference are balanced by the infantile title. Another poem, 'The Side Project,' juxtaposes the world of the circus with the world of streetwise politics. The language and world of children and entertainment frequently check the troubled world of adults in Muldoon's poetry. Several other poems in *Maggot* activate a serioludic language that not only balances the tragic and the comic, but also offers a more profound scrutiny of language, and furnishes artistic impetus for a renewal of human language and thinking. 'Nope' and

Aistriúchán Cloak: Paul Muldoon and the Irish Language,' 123–134. Edna Longley and Jonathan Allison point to Muldoon's uncanny use of verbs and modalities in 'Varieties of Parable: Louis MacNeice and Paul Muldoon,' in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), 211–241; '"Everything Provisional." Fictive Possibility and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson,' 87–93. Peter Denman displays the elegance of Muldoon's post-Saussurean hypograms in '"O Mould-Breaker and Pun-Maker": Paul Muldoon and the Prosody of the Letter,' in *Paul Muldoon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2006), 19–36.

'Yup' balance entertainment and solemnity. Fun, hilarity, irony, satire and sarcasm contradict, coincide and converge with sadness, sorrow, earnestness, seriousness, solemnity and respect. One of many strengths in Muldoon's poetry is that these emotions can be undefined, confused, mingled. One of the many fulcrums of his language is that letters, lexicon and larger lines continue to define the complexity of the human condition, and that his poetic language frequently resists giving in to the expected language of enjoyment or that of the ethically serious.

Michael Longley's witty comment that Muldoon can rhyme a cat with a dog pinpoints Muldoon's sensitivity to sounds and his facility in creating unexpected linguistic constellations.[15] The comment also serves to remind readers that *Maggot* rhymes with *Madoc*, Muldoon's collection of poetry from 1990 that might be regarded as the apogee of his engagement with the enigmas of language, and, perhaps, warrants the label of poetry's equivalent to *Finnegans Wake*. In the context of creative writing and critical analysis from Joyce to Longley, the title *Maggot* is dangled as bait for the critical fish to catch. As the reception of Muldoon's poetry from his debut with *New Weather* in 1973 has shown, there are many piranhas in the critical pond: some fight ferociously, some do not take the bait at all. As a much-published reviewer, a long-standing professor of creative writing at Princeton University, the Oxford Professor of Poetry 1999–2004 and the *New Yorker* editor of poetry 2007–2017, Muldoon knows full well how the literary swim works in its different critical waters. Secondly, maggot might function as a figure of self-identification, another subjective correlative, and suggest Muldoon himself, the poet, or indeed other poets and writers in general. It casts the poet in the image of a creature that crawls around in his own hidden realm, digesting its own matter, mostly ignored or even despised by most people, apart from anglers, children and biologists. Maggots do a vital job that most often goes unnoticed. Maggots – blind, despicable, mostly unseen – are part of a popular pastime in some small piscatorial circles, but entirely necessary for everyone in their and renovation of dead materials and stale matter. Maggot could also be a symbol of poetry itself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of Muldoon's favourite books, a maggot is a 'soft-bodied apodous larva, esp. of a housefly, blowfly, or other dipteran fly, typically found in decaying organic matter and formerly supposed to be generated by decay.'[16] With this definition in mind, maggot connects poetry directly to death and decomposition. However, with all its implications of

15 See Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian*, 29; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 141.

16 'My wife has just bought me the 13-volume OED as a present; I just love it.' AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 14.

metamorphosis from a blind, earthbound creature to an insect of the air famous for its enlarged eyes, the figure of the maggot testifies to the transformative powers of poetry and its agile eyes for a wider world. Obviously, this choice of maggot as a metaphor for poetry also undercuts the standard trope of the chrysalis of a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, and many of the Romanticist ideas of poetry associated with that idea of creative transformation. The conception of poetry as maggot-ridden becomes even clearer when it is compared to and contrasted with other similar metaphors in Muldoon's collection and in this volume, for example all the Yeatsian circus animals, all the beasts and all the birds. In all their variety, none of these have the same gravitation towards the macabre, towards the moribund and the mortal. 'We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots,' Hamlet reminds us all.[17]

Maggots also make up a substantial part of the collection's stylistic and thematic concerns. The metaphor of larva is incorporated in many poems, not only in the title poem 'Maggot,' but also in 'Ohrwurm' and '@,' and in its transformations as fly in 'A Mayfly' and 'Capriccio in E minor for Blowfly and Strings.' On an intertextual level maggot suggests how themes and techniques in this volume creep and crawl from one poem to the next and then migrate further afield. From this intertextual perspective, the proximity of maggots to worms and the poem in the volume written in memory of Samuel Beckett, 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett,' serve to connect *Maggot* with Beckett's writing. Beckett's universe, in particular the one of Mahood and Worm in *The Unnamable* in Beckett's *Trilogy* where language seems forever to fail to articulate existential dilemmas and individual pain, suggests some fertile soil for Muldoon's *Maggot*. And who knows, perhaps these maggots appear as a transmutation of the many eels that swim back and forth between Heaney's, Muldoon's and the international canon of eel poetry? Parts of Muldoon's *Maggot* certainly reverts to the old grounds of his own – and Heaney's – poetry in a similar way to what Heaney does at the beginning of *Electric Light*.

The trope of the maggot may prompt further hermeneutic connections to be made. If maggot indicates death and decay, it also suggests song, dance and play. Maggot was formerly used in the title of many dance tunes, as it is also used in this volume in the poem 'My Lord Byron's Maggot.' The light and spritely tones and tunes of these lines add a counterpoint to the many weighty leitmotifs of the collection, just as the reference to Lord Byron points to the complexity of high idealism and personal conduct. The allusion to Lord Byron captures the uncanny atmosphere of dedication and debauchery on the part of

17 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1601), IV. 3, 21.

the delegates at ‘the Motivational Seminar’ (56) in Muldoon’s Byronic maggot. Figuratively, maggot designates parasitical people and pernicious influences. Delegates at ‘the Motivational seminar,’ whether they are politicians or poets, may or may not belong to this group, but other poems in this collection, for example ‘Plan B’ and ‘Extraordinary Rendition,’ associate parasitism and perniciousness with the people of power who benefit from a system they continuously debase. Both poems are laden with questions of political power and individual rights, and with the fragile position of the individual human being in a time when many states have resorted to anti-democratic measures to defend their own sense of ‘democracy.’ The artistically self-reflexive interrogations in ‘Plan B,’ for example, run parallel to state violations of individual rights:

> like a confession extorted from a birch,
> the foot-wide pedestal upon which a prisoner would perch
>
> on one leg in the former KGB headquarters
> like a white stork
>
> before tipping into a pool of icy water,
> to be reinstated more than once by a guard with a pitchfork. (4)

The suppressive agencies of state might have changed – ‘former KGB’ – but the dehumanising methods of violent interrogation continue. Torture by water strikes a raw contemporary nerve in the controversial state-authorised waterboarding in several jurisdictions, most flagrantly by one of the world’s leading democracies, the USA, in the wake of the 9/11 calamities. The very title of the other poem, ‘Extraordinary Rendition,’ refers directly to the many enforced disappearances and ghost detainees that result from the abduction and illegal transfer of a person from one nation to another, particularly for the purposes of violent interrogation for political reasons – a crucial question of democracy and human rights highlighted by the existence of the Guantanamo interrogation centre. In the new political climate after the cold war, the two poems question the people in power who deprive others of liberty in the name of the supposed democracy they represent and which fostered them. Finally, one should not forget that the archaic sense of maggot still exists in some regions as a colloquialism for a whimsical, eccentric, strange and perverse notion or idea. In this respect, maggots suggest a symbol for Muldoon’s powers of poetry; his ability to attend to the unexpected and the unpalatable, frequently in a language that has been retrieved from dark recesses and unseen places – his talent for acting the maggot.

Not only do maggots take on multiple meanings in this volume as metaphors of poetry and poets, politics and politicians, and as creatures that metaphorically confront unpopular topics, they also appear as figures of language. On a lexical level, the language in this collection is characterised by multiple semantics and the typical Muldoonian exploration of etymological layers. On a syntactical level, the language surprises with the unpredictable movements of line and sentence. On a narrative level – 'The Humors of Hakone' and 'Yup' are specimens of Muldoonian alterrative – the experimental language parallels the many twists and turns of the collection's themes and topics. Muldoon's way with language is original, complex and divagatory. 'Balls,' for example, calls for a snicker, just as much as the verses are filled with substantive matters and grim humour. Muldoon declares that he has taken 'The Cock,' 'Dafydd ap Gwilym's brassy address (in Medieval Welsh) to his own member … as my cue to meditate on some aspects of the testicles, surely a topic which is, even now, far from exhausted.'[18] The title might be as linguistically offensive as the contents are novel. The poem plays on all the multiple meanings of the titular word apart from sports – 'these love nuts, these eggs, these pills' (81) – in verses that testify to sexual liberalism and male reactions to the possible diagnosis of testicular cancer. Still, the poem also encompasses themes of justice and torture, in the sense of witness and ball-breaking, as the etymological quest reveals:

> the loss of Latin, the loss of a sense of the Latin root and stem
> that would help us weigh in on which came first – be it *testis* as 'witness'
> or *testis* as the 'ball' on which the oath was sworn. (84)

These 'ball-broodings' all take the form of sonnets in order to emphasise, if not the ideals of love and truth, then certainly the human virility and powers of endurance and resilience that might prove themselves when love and truth are violated. The variegated sonnet form also stresses Muldoon's intimate relations with a vital, mysterious, attractive and vital language. 'Balls' ranges from liberal lewdness to individual distress and an embrace of public concerns in lines that dwell on etymology and provide entertainment. The poem traverses the realms of disease, anamnesis and jurisprudence. Like *Maggot* and Muldoon's classic poem 'Quoof,' it is an attractive poem about the nature of poetry and language, a language that could be said to assist in changing the way we speak, and also the way we think.

18 Paul Muldoon, *When the Pie Was Opened* (Paris: Sylph Editions, 2008), 10.

'Nope' and 'Yup' are two other 'p@stmodernist' poems that conflate profound concerns with humorous ones. In their colloquial concision, these brief titles sound funny and the lexical layers of the title words imply the complex interface between the comic and the serious. As slang for 'no' and acronym for 'nowhere on planet earth,' 'Nope' posits the negative. As slang for 'yes' and acronym for 'young urban professional,' 'Yup' posits the positive. By its six repetitive negations – 'It's not,' 'It's not' … – 'Nope' seems to produce more hermeneutic possibility than the affirmative statements of 'Yup.' As a type of negational narrative 'Nope' always denies its own story and contents, and continuously provokes the question: So, what is this poem about, then? If the poem is 'not just another leper … making a case for Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus' (51), is it about general justice? And what might that be in today's state, or in the world? Is the poem about the disease of people, or of the narrator, whoever she or he might be? 'My own terms are so ill defined' (51). Or is that line a self-reflexive comment upon the government of language and the anatomy of poetry? The intratextual quality of the poem – 'Nope' relates to 'The Side Project' and to all the other poems on disease, justice and sea creatures in this collection – confirms its connectivity within the volume despite its self-effacing qualities. 'Nope' is not a poem about itself or ourselves only. Rather, it is about compassion for others and it is thus integrated with the other poems through the rhyming couplets of the genre of the sonnet and the scathing ironic cynicism of the final verse which declares: 'It's not just another leper who's lost the gift of pain.' 'Habeas Corpus,' Latin for 'you have your body,' one or perhaps *the* principle of law enforcement that the body is inviolate, extends in this poem from the controversial political sphere of international incarceration – the extraordinary rendition that the later poem of that title inverts – to health policies, and to the policies of the arts and language. The poem's title, form and its many negations – 'Nope,' 'It's not' – declare in very low-key language that the body politic is flawed, crippled and diseased.

Whereas 'Nope' tends to multiply questions and hermeneutic possibilities by negation, 'Yup' tends to reduce interpretation through affirmation. The poem, another version in a smaller format of the collection's 'The Humors of Hakone,' offers the story of 'a bottlenose dolphin' and 'a forensic entomologist' (77), which could obviously suggest two psychological aspects of the same yup as much as two different yuppies. In a poetic play upon commercial crime series such as CSI, the poem explores violations of law and personal psychology. Despite their apparent oppositions, 'Nope' and 'Yup' correspond with each other. They overlap in their exploration of personal and public themes and issues. They both play on creatures of the sea – 'mermaid' and 'porpoise' in 'Nope,' 'bottlenose dolphin' in 'Yup.' Both poems are typical Muldoonian

sonnets. Both poems are extremely intratextual. Due to their opposition, not in spite of it, 'Nope' and 'Yup' correspond with each other. In their abnegation and affirmation, the two poems not only suggest opposing attitudes to life, they also display the grammar of disagreement. Beneath apparent oppositions, antagonistic attitudes and confrontational rhetoric, common points and similarities exist. On the level of syntax and grammar, 'Nope' and 'Yup' offer a challenge and suggest an alternative to divisive structures and rigid strictures of separation.

Even more so than the colloquial retort-based 'Yup' and 'Nope,' Muldoon presents in his p@stmodernist '@' verses based upon everyday communication. It makes sense that a poet who has made extensive use of single letters and intricate language in his poetry now predicates a poem upon one of the predominant signs of our times. The symbol that has almost required the status of a letter in the alphabet, and that appears as an almost unnoticed everyday event in most corners of the world, vouches for an accessibility that outstrips most metaphors of nature and urban life. New signs come with new fascinations. And new questions. In his poetic activation of @, primarily a written sign in the streams of technological communication from email to twitter, Muldoon pays tribute to, traces and plays with the linguistic sign of our technological age – a high-frequency phenomenon of language that largely goes unnoticed in the currents of daily exchange, almost like a Derridean exergue.[19] '@' twirls and swirls and reminds us of the Muldoonian fascination for signs, letters, language and poetry. @, as a sign of no fixed origin and without any particular status until very recently but which today appears ubiquitous, concretises recent philosophical critiques of Western structures of thought as innate, essential, self-evident and self-justifiable systems that have always been present and neutral: they have always been there, they are given, they are unchangeable. But such cognitive structures and thought systems are dependent upon everything the structure excludes, upon the other, the elsewhere and the contingent, and upon the medium of language through which they are sustained – the narrathanographic, the alterrative, the italicette and the quoofish in Muldoon's poetry. Post-structuralist critique from Foucault and Derrida and beyond has developed an awareness of the dangers, flaws and risks of systems, structures and language that do not take into account their own coming into being, their own exclusion of contending discourses, and their own mediation in language – the many hegemonic discourses that Muldoon's poetry refracts and/or posits itself against. Most tracing of even the most accepted, or perhaps especially the most accepted, signs, ideas, convictions and

19 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3–5.

beliefs tend to end up at originary moments where the expected source proves split, fractured, diverse and complex, in Muldoonian poetics as much as post-structuralist philosophy. Today language, life and thinking without @ can hardly be imagined, at least not in affluent parts of the world. Yet the letter-like sign exists only outside the alphabet and the OED, and only came into its current status since the pioneering American programmer and primary originator of email, Roy Tomlinson, introduced the sign into, at the time, our newest technological means of communication in 1971: email. Tomlinson happened to have a keyboard which, unusually, included the @ 'poised above "P" on his Model 33 teletype,' and chose the least used symbol on his machine for his email system, 'probably saving it from going the way of the "cent" sign on computer keyboards.'[20] That Tomlinson allegedly composed his first email message, 'qwertyuiop,' from the top key row of his machine, the American QWERTY keyboard, is a story of origin that belongs to the alluring history of alphabetic arbitration – in language and Muldoon's poetics and much further afield. Alphabetic haphazardness, technological chance, apparent unintelligibility and its resemblance to the language of codes has brought the @ sign from obsolescence to omnipresence. That the new sign has already been inducted into the Museum of Modern Art for its 'elegance, economy, intellectual transparency and a sense of the possible future directions that are embedded in the arts of our time' – qualities that have undoubtedly also inspired Muldoon – indicate its status as already historical.[21] It is no wonder that a poet and creative writing professor of our postmodernist era with a propensity for the abstruse and aberrant aspects of language predicates a poem upon this symbol of current communication. Universally included in all computer keyboards and mobile displays universally known as the 'at sign' or 'commercial at' in the English language, the sign nevertheless takes its form from alphabetic compression and imaginative speculation, and gains meaning in etymology: the @-sign can only be traced to a number of fractured and haphazard sources. As a typographic ligature @ combines a and d or t into a single symbol (like æ combines a and e or the ampersand & combines e and t) to suggest the preposition at. Ligatures decreased drastically in the development from handwriting to print and IT, apart from the @ that became indispensable to the cost of most of the others, and that congealed into a logogram. According to most encyclopaedias and websites on the sign, this concentration of two letters into a new sign occurred intermittently in different places at different times – some of them still more

20 F. William Allman, 'The Accidental History of the @ Symbol,' *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2012. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-accidental-history-of-the-symbol-18054936/, accessed 17 April 2019.

21 Ibid.

mystic than rational – frequently for economic purposes of time and ink, as much as cost concerns and the priorities of commerce. One theory is that medieval monks, many of them likely to have been Irish, 'converted the Latin word for "toward" – *ad* – to "a" with the back part of the "d" as a tail.'[22] @ harbours within itself traces of the different, the excluded and the originary in its apparent neutrality and translucence. As a fascinating new sign of originary complexity, certainly flexible and capacious if not empty, the letter-constructed logogram has accumulated numerous different associations. Other languages appear to fill in the semantic void of the anaemic and analytical English term, the at sign. Appellations in other languages appear more evocative, and are obviously inspired by the graphics of the signifier itself: alpha swirl, ear, long-tailed a, monkey tail, snabel-a (elephant- or trunk-a), snail, strudel-a, tiny duck, teeny mouse, rose and worm. Whereas the mythology of trees might lie behind the early medieval Irish alphabet Ogham, the sign itself appears to suggest animations in the case of @. Muldoon's poem interacts creatively with the genesis, form and playfulness of the sign. The sign's disseminated aetiologies and its swirling signifying qualities infuse the form, motions and sentence of his poetic creation. @ can be regarded in its graphic manifestation as a forceful signifier that flings its energies centrifugally from its centre towards its margins. Similarly, the poem appears as a sonnet that has flung its stanzas out of kilter. Furthermore, the syntax appears to have lost its centre. All the similes – 'Like the whorl,' 'Like the ever-unfolding trunk,' 'Like the scroll-down tail,' 'Like the tapeworm' (74) – are written in dependent clauses that never arrive at their point of resolution or logical and grammatical conclusion. It is not that the centre cannot hold, the series of dependencies indicates that the sign never had a centre and that the references towards which it strives are numerous, uncertain and indecisive: 'Like the tapeworm swallowed by a hippie who once was fat / but is now kind of bummed out you've lost track of where she's at' (74). The poem starts and ends on the same difference, @ and at, with the irony that a poem apparently on the sign of communication and connection ends on separation and loss. The 'old hippie girlfriend' in the poem draws upon a long series of break-up poems in Muldoon's poetry, most noticeable in *Mules* and *Why Brwonlee Left*, but recalls most specifically the S — figure in 'Yarrow.' In '@,' their fall out and loss of relations are inscribed by all the lost letters of 'rlshps,' a truncated word of current digispeak that also indicates some of the fascinating new transformations, and symbolises the evident reductive tendencies of new media – the wayside shrines of information superhighways. '@,' in addition to its relations to a number of female partners in previous

22 Ibid.

poems, relates as much to other language concept poems: the alphaphilia of 'The Plot' (*H*, 15), the B-series in 'Horse Latitudes' (*HL*, 3–21) and 'Plan B' and 'Ohrwurm' in this volume. In its IT focus it also anticipates 'Dirty Data' in the succeeding volume, *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. Still, '@,' in all its sense of place specification, relates ambiguously to Muldoon's own place name poems. His early *dinnseanchas*, which include for example 'Macha' and 'Clonfeacle' in *New Weather*, tended to stretch the genre's rootedness in typographical features, traditional lore and Gaelic onomastics. Muldoon's poems supplemented those of Heaney, Montague and others in the same genre at the time. Poems such as 'The Electric Garden' and 'Easter Island' in the same volume can also be read within this interpretational framework. City poems such as 'Paris' (*M*, 40) and alterratives such as 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' and 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' have since extended, enriched and rendered more complex our view of the sense of place in his poetry.[23] '@' transports the challenging questions of place into virtual space. It also reminds us that many of the existential questions – on place, on language, on our relations to others, on how we relate to rapid transformations in and of our own condition – remain the same, in spite of the conditioning of our daily lives by new technology. '@' enacts, in its logogrammatic title, disseminated form, swirling syntax and separateness, the fractures, flaws and failings in the sign from which it takes its title and meanings. Muldoon's poem reveals that @ is a sign that has sublimated itself from its own deferral and difference into a neutral logogram in the technological means of communication of our age. His poem bears equally upon the media and information technology in which domain the sign is now chiefly used. IT and PCs have congealed, like @, into a neutral and largely unquestioned medium of communication that progressively eclipses former forms of correspondence and knowledge: hand-writing, print, books, libraries. Disintegration of relationships in the poem indicates how digital media threaten to decrease physical encounters through its endless possibilities of digital 'friendships.' Furthermore, Muldoon's reminder of the complexity of sign and digital media, as well as and his depiction of the disintegration of human relationships, also intimate the other sides of the net: its possibility for crime, ex-

23 For an excellent book on the importance of place in Muldoon's poetry, see Karhio, *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Place*. Karhio's theoretical discussion of Muldoon's poetry includes discerning analyses of 'Quoof,' 'Immram,' The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' 'Horse Latitudes' and '@.' Some of the other titles that beg for more attention are 'The Electric Orchard,' 'The Big House,' 'Paris,' 'Armageddon, Armageddon,' 'The Geography Lesson,' 'Making the Move,' 'The Sightseers,' 'Ontario,' 'Meeting the British,' '7, Middagh Street,' 'Twice,' 'A Journey to Cracow,' 'The Sod Farm,' 'Wayside Shrines' 'At the Lab,' 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower II*.'

ploitation and illegal and anti-democratic networking. From a wider perspective, this peculiar little poem implies how daily gadgets have been largely disconnected from the fraught and complex discourses to which they belong: globalism, internationalisation, capitalism, surveillance, freedom of speech, democracy. However, the poem and most likely its author too, are not technophobic. Although the poem addresses with irony and critique many of the contexts and discourses of the media to which the @ sign belongs, the poem also shows a fascination for the sign and for the new language and technology of which it is part. Perhaps Muldoon's little page worm will come to function as 'Pangur Ban' (the secular poem on scholarly pursuits and on finding the precise word by the Irish monk found as a gloss in the margins in his transcription of Latin holy texts in the ninth century, of which Muldoon offers his own version in 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' (*H*, 74)). Both Muldoon's poem '@' and the symbol @ work as apt and perspicacious signs for the broader post-structuralist scrutiny of seemingly self-evident structures that never question their own existence and their own coming into being. This seemingly innocuous sign also assists in setting out terms for a deeper understanding of language before and beyond usage and grammatical categories, and it also conditions our appreciation of the language of Muldoon's poetry.

Muldoon's language is also a poetic language. For all the theoretical discussions of poetic language from the new criticism of I.A. Richards via the communication theories of Roman Jakobson to the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, nobody who has ever read one of Muldoon's poems is in doubt about the difference between (his) poetic language and all other types of language.[24] His circulations of, around and from the @ sign illustrate this clearly. Muldoon's meditations on the margins of this sign differ distinctly from all definitions and expositions of the sign. Nevertheless, their poetic (Muldonic) form is clearly part of language, but it would give little syntactic cohesion or logical meaning in a scientific definition of the sign, or one made with reference to other discourses. Where '@' takes its poetic twirls from a sign, 'The Humors of Hakone' revolves around poetry. The poem is written as a posthumous retrospective in the vacuum left after the irrevocable act of murder. As the title suggests, these verses play on the four humours of Hippocrates' proto-psychological medicine (sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic) and on the setting of Japan. The killing of a buoyant being and spritely soul would infuriate

24 I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1961 [1925]); Roman Jakobson, 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,' in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Michigan Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 350–378. See all of Derrida's essays in *Acts of Literature*, perhaps most specifically, 'The Law of Genre,' 221–251.

anyone except, it seems, the deadpan investigator who exudes a gloomy sense of bleakness and despair. Japan is depicted as a bustling urban society, but also figures as the ultimate other to much of Western culture.[25] These verses also play on crime scene investigations – an update of the private eye genre that drives 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' (*Q*, 40–64) – a post-mortem to ascertain the cause of death by examining a murdered body. Unsurprisingly for a Muldoonian quest or crime tale, the mystery is not solved. In a final dissolution, recognizable from 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' and a circular inconclusiveness, recognisable from 'Immram' (WBL, 38–47), the mystery ends without denouement or resolution – back at line one. Much of the knowledge and many of the insights are still startling, not least this one: the dead body in the murder investigation can be a poem as much as a young girl. The first and final sentences of this nine-episode forensic drama run:

> A corduroy road over a quag had kept me on the straight and narrow.
> Now something was rising a stink.
> A poem decomposing around what looked like an arrow.
> Her stomach contents ink. (63)
> [...]
> All I had to go on was a single maggot puparium
> to help me substantiate the date of a corduroy road over a quag. (71)

Who did it? Why? When? How? Who are the next of kin and mourners? How much evidence can be retrieved from what sources and what will the evidence tell us of the deceased's life? Will the murder ever be re-opened by a cold case unit? Will some of the evidence contribute to other cases or reform the methods of investigation? Parallels and points of comparison between the fates of murder victim and poem are many, and not without their own sense of humour. Muldoon's concept in this poem can be read as being in deadly contrast to all types of organicist poetics. Its ambience of dissolution, finality and hopelessness also countervails any highfalutin aspirations of writing for posterity – which will certainly be a reason for this poem's longevity. There is also the deep sense of a poet's or a reader's or a critic's bottomless despair at the murder of poetry. Epistemological quest, the search for knowledge in all its shapes and contours from detective narratives to philosophical investigations, has long been a template for literature, not least Muldoon's own, but a poem like 'The Humors of Hakone' reveals more than any the futility of knowledge in the face

25 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982 [1970]).

of ontological despair and human desolation: all the knowledge in the world will not bring the dead back to life. Already in 1987 Brian McHale asserted that 'the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*' and its primary question is 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?,' and that 'the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*' and its primary questions are: 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?'[26] 'The Humors of Hakone' is balanced between the worlds of mundane murder and spiritual liquidation. The setting is split between the doubly alienated forensic subculture of a foreign place, Japan, and the other world of poetry, the arts and philosophy. 'Humors' belong to both worlds. The persona acts and thinks much like a poet does – 'the body of a poem is no less sacred / than a temple with a banner gash // though both stink to high heaven' (68) – as a crime scene investigator: 'the potassium analysis of the gelatin / in the vitreous humor' (70). The different parts of the persona frequently overlap: 'Who knew the body is a footnote / to the loss of its own heat,' 'All I had to go on was the hunch that pupae would assail / the girl from the sticker-photo booth at the same rate as a poem cadaver,' 'To fix the time of death is hard // if not hopeless.' (67, 70, 71). Pathologists, prosodists and philosophers have a lot in common when it comes to anatomy, dissection and analysis. In fact, the investigations for evidence, for perpetrators and explanations in the unresolved case of the poem can be seen as a parable for the quest for sources and origins in language and life. In the criminal case, bodies, witnesses and investigation disintegrate and disappear, while in the broader domains of enquiry, for example in philology, biology and history, the foundations of the discipline can frequently only be traced back to its own dissolutions. The past, in whatever form it is pursued and scrutinised, does not always solve the case and any instinctive resort to the idea that it does so needs to be challenged. The past may even best be ignored, however morally incumbent and rationally justifiable recourse to the past might appear in certain predicaments. Language is split too, as letters, sounds, words, phrases and syntax refer to poetic interpretation and analysis as much as to police inquiry and autopsy reports. Repetitions and refrains in Muldoon's murder inquest reflect such optimistic hope and resigned reality. 'All I had to go on' alternates with 'it was far too late' to couple the inevitability of investigations into the past with the futility they sometimes yield. Such artificial roundels ring with the longevity of art, however much their circular technique also reinforces the poem's mood of stagnation and stasis. Other carefully constructed iterations

26 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 9–11.

insert moods of resistance, durability and survival into the poem's gravitational pull which tends towards death and dispiritedness. 'Who knew'-questions, always into etymology and specific language cases, insert a sense of creative encouragement and spiritual stimulation that counterbalances the pathological gloom of dejection. Such philological curiosity nevertheless also copies as much as it contends with the quest for clues. The quest for textual clues parallels the search for forensic evidence. Corpses appear in several poems. Textual clues are numerous. Solutions are few. Whereas the final poem was used to present a crescendo of preceding poems in earlier volumes, 'The Humors of Hakone' illustrates succinctly how poems situated elsewhere in individual volumes have increasingly taken on this cross-referentiality at the expense of the final long poem in recent volumes. A crime scene investigator appears as a young aspiring professional in 'Yup' a few pages further on: 'A forensic entomologist examines a corpse' (77). The cross-distribution of words and phrases provides new clues and insights. Worms, larvae, pupae, maggots and blowfly crawl and swarm in these stanzas too. The four humours concentrated in these verses appear separately in other poems. Sometimes such cross-references elevate the mood, but frequently they aggravate the atmosphere. They contribute to deeper understanding and further speculation, but not to any solution. Further intratextual investigations corroborate this tendency. Alliteration connects 'The Humors of Hakone' with 'Hopewell Haiku' in *Hay* in 'provocative propinquity' and 'felicitous fusions,' to take the cue from Muldoon himself.'[27] 'Narrow – stink – arrow – ink,' the rhyme words of the first four lines, connect the death of the poem in these verses to the death and the same rhyme words in the commemorative verses for Mary Farl Powers and Brigid Regan in 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile* – poems that are very much still alive. Finally, Muldoon's multiple inquiry also relates ambiguously to a string of similar cases of Japanese influence in the tradition of Irish and Northern Irish poetry.[28] Will Muldoon's poem dispatch or continue this tradition? Questions continuously outweigh solutions. In 'The Humors of Hakone,' the pursuit of information does not lead to a solution in either of the worlds in which the persona plays a part. Uncertainty of which world the split persona is in, in

27 Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Beasts*, xvi.

28 For the Japanese dimension in Irish literature, see Irene de Angelis and Joseph Woods, eds., *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2007); Charles Ivan Armstrong, 'Drinking Tea, Drawing Ideograms and Making Waves: Pursuing the "Japanese Effect" in Irish Poetry,' in *Beyond Ireland: Encounters across Cultures*, ed. Hedda Friberg-Harnesk, Gerald Porter, and Joakim Wrethed (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 11–30; Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Suracuse University Press, 2004).

which he achieves nothing, augments the poem's mood of world weariness, resignation and apathy. Language and reference in the poem accentuate undecidability. 'The Humours of Hakone' is a poem that lays bare, like a corpse upon a mortuary table, the epistemological futility and ontological uncertainty of our time.

'Loss of Separation: A Companion' makes use of technological terminology and critical moments in communication and mass transportation to create a multilayered poem that dwells on the human predicament. The poem also exhibits intertextual tension and linguistic conceit. As a concept poem driven by language, this technique and strategy correspond with the techno-semiotics of '@' and the patho-metaphorics of 'The Humors of Hakone.' 'Loss of Separation' is a term from air traffic control that designates the loss of minimum distance between aircrafts, or other contraventions of the limits of space regulations. Such a loss may result in damage to aircraft, injury to passengers and personnel or downright collision with catastrophic results. The term is far more frequent in aviation and air traffic control than most people would like to think, and has become the situation of ultimate terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. That loss of separation, not loss of communication, exists as a lethal danger in transport and daily life runs contrary to standard lines of communication in aviation and space exploration, to common knowledge, and to ordinary language. 'Loss of Separation' sounds oxymoronic even before its constellated proximity in the title with 'Companion,' and before and beyond the title's reference to air traffic. To conceive of separation as vital to survival tends to strike some very inflammable points of rhetoric in relation to the discourses of multiculturalism, integration and global solidarity. One interpretation of the poem suggests the necessity of minimum distance as essential to companionship – in relations to others, to oneself, and to language – in order to avoid collision, implosion and self-sameness. Another interpretation, suggested by the second half of the title and the separation-induced conflicts and losses in the poem, implies that separation causes more damage and loss than companionship. The term 'companion' points as much to a fellow traveller, a comrade in arms, and a friend in both concrete and abstract terms, and to counterparts of all kinds, as much as to a manual, for example in air traffic control from which 'loss of separation' might be derived. A second sense of the word companion, as staircase or ladder connecting different decks and levels, contradicts directly the whole idea of 'loss of separation.' Interaction and movements between separate levels are also essential to damage and loss management. Levels of altitude, high speed, high risk, corridors of communication, control towers, pilots, passengers and goods – the main concepts of the poem – read like a manual in how the higher strata of society plan and control the separation of knowledge

and information in society in ways that are habitually delimited in uncompanionable ways through separate corridors of information distribution, under labels of national security, business policy, levels of classified information, confidentiality, restricted and secret access to information, and how such piloting of society causes colossal damage, loss, conflict and catastrophe. Business policies, government media, private networks, intelligence bureaus, information agencies, information wars and wikileaks are some keywords which may help to unlock the poem. Although Muldoon's double-sided poem entertains the necessity of loss of separation that it simultaneously tends to criticise, the verses are inclined to favour companionship over separation, and to extend their sympathy to weaker groups and the individual who tend to carry the brunt of loss of separation policies. New, strange and unexpected kinds of communication and companionship can contribute to survival and the common good, as the excerpt in the poem from Pliny's *Natural History* on the cooperation between dolphins and humans indicates. A strong personal first-person voice in all stanzas recounts a narrative of personal loss as a result of changes in larger policies. Movements from international politics to domestic American policies in the first two stanzas of this sonnet turn into individual disempowerment and personal loss after the volta in line six. The persona evinces disillusionment with how the idealism of Kropotkin's 1902 essay *Mutual Aid*: *A Factor of Evolution* and the international cooperation in the founding of Israel have ended in the new state's blockade of Palestine. He also expresses disaffection as an assembly line worker, possibly a redundant one, in the high capital low wage car industry. His troubles are compounded by loose love relations and an increasing loss of self: 'I've completely lost the thread / and find myself asking a river / to run that by me one more time' (90). Although the persona suffers injury and loss from a continuous downward spiral caused mainly by forces out of his control, like a passenger on a plummeting plane or a survivor from a crash, there is still an inclement note in the final verses that he or she should distance him- or herself from these losses in order to go on. These multiple ambiguities of loss, separation and companionship also apply to the situation of poetics. Whether the poet fills the position of air traffic controller, pilot or passenger probably varies a lot in time and place, and also within the format of a single poem. Poetic flight is a standard manoeuvre, albeit this poem, just like 'The Humors of Hakone,' appears to gain height by its vital awareness of accidents, collisions, crashes and fatalities in poetic space. Perhaps the causes of death for the dead poem found in Japan can be traced in this one? Loss of separation in poetic space leads to interference, collision and truncated life, if any, for most poems, whereas a companion provides support and survival. These two weights seem to balance in equilibrium in 'Loss of Separation: A Companion.' Stanza three demonstrates loss of separation and

companionship: 'where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim' are the exact same lines as all third stanzas in the sonnet series of Maggot.' The loss of separation in personal desire and amorous affairs leads to whimsical decisions and a string of companions. These verses also demonstrate the loss of separation in their compatibility and in their function as a bridge between the two poems written in sonnet form with thematic concerns of human and technological breakdown and crashes. 'A Humming Bird,' the next poem on 'Nora's first post-divorce Labor Day bash' (91), is certainly a companion piece in its engagement with themes of separation, loss, society, social chit-chat and flight communications of metaphorical humming birds, a species of birds which is, fittingly, designated in language by a troubling, a charm or a hovering of humming birds. Other possible companion poems would include 'A Collegelands Catechism' (MSG, 15) in its tension between elevation and gravitation, 'Ireland' (WBL, 19) in its evocation of the current nerve of terror and uncertainty in the metaphor of an assembly line product, and 'The Radio Horse' (*NW*, 21) in its far-reaching technological metaphoricity. There are many other Muldonic companions when it comes to turning the line and running the sentence, and when it comes to the sonnet form, to lexical intricacies, metaphorical intrigue and constellations of conceits. In the wider sphere of literary loss and filiation, perhaps this poem is the most burnished companion piece to the Metaphysical poetry that Muldoon revers:

> Donne I think most dramatically exemplifies Dr. Johnson's put down of the metaphysical conceit – taking heterogeneous ideas and "yoking them by violence together." Some version of a Metaphysical conceit is a common element in many of my poems, and Donne is probably my main influence.[29]

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29 'There were two books that I was reading in those years. Helen Gardner's edition of *The Metaphysical Poets* and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, a revised edition edited by Donald Hall and Michael Roberts. It came out in 1965, when I was about fourteen,' Muldoon says in the same interview. James S.F. Wilson, 'Paul Muldoon, the Art of Poetry,' *The Paris Review* 87, no. 169 (2004), https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/30/paul-muldoon-the-art-of-poetry-no-87-paul-muldoon, accessed 17 April 2019. 'Consider some of the great 17th-century poets who dealt with a vast information explosion. John Donne had to find a way of dealing with the high and the low. We can still learn from him.' Suzan Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' *Bomb*, no. 65 (1998 Fall), 77. See also Dinitia Smith, 'Times Are Difficult, So Why Should the Poetry Be Easy?; Paul Muldoon Continues to Create by Lashing Outlandish Ideas Together,' *The New York Times*, 19November2002,http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/19/books/times-are-difficult-so-why-should-poetry-be-easy-paul-muldoon-continues-create.html, accessed 17 April 2019; Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' 75–94.

Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidden Mourning' and Muldoon's 'Loss of Separation: A Companion' traverse the centuries. They fly parallel in their title's prosodic pitch, syntactic similarity and sense of separation. Both titles evoke travel and overlapping conceits of proximity and distance. The thin line of minimum separation and the balance between loss and companionship, upon which these verses balance, uphold language too. Loss of separation and companionship appear, as Muldoon's poem reveals, to overlap and converge semantically. In phonology, minimal pairs are distinguished and prevented from collapsing into each other by subtle singular phenomena such as the phoneme, toneme or chroneme. Repetitions in Muldoon's poem of 'I used to think' and 'I used to think' and 'fight' and 'fight' illustrate clearly linguistic loss of separation. 'Fight' and 'right' illuminates a phonological minimal pair. 'First,' 'fight,' 'fin,' 'line,' 'lover,' 'river' present a linguistic run of minute, if not minimal, differentiation and pairs. '*Mutual Aid*' and 'blockade' sound very similar for all their difference. In fact, the poem's binary confusion and dependence on minimal linguistic difference can be regarded as a poetic enactment of all the Derridean dissemination, deconstruction, differentiation and deferral of meaning in the factoid *différance*: somewhere there is a line or a letter or a linguistic phenomenon that prevents loss of meaning.

Muldoon is an expert in construing poetry, art and meaning from signs, and that plays on minimal linguistic differences in language, for example in such poems as '@,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'Loss of Separation: A Companion,' 'Errata,' 'The Plot,' 'Quoof' and several others. These poems and the very title of this volume, *Maggot*, demonstrate that the critical divide between the 'slippery, virtuous game of words' or 'profound ethical consciousness' in the phrase of Kennedy-Andrews, is misconceived. The tendency to separate language from content appears as futile as separating melody from music, paint from painting, dancer from dance. Furthermore, playfulness and profundity often intermingle and are not always distinguishable. 'Plan B', the very first poem in *Maggot*, could be read as a direct response to this schismatic question of Muldoon as language gamer or serious poet that is posed by many critics: it is a poem that questions the question and reveals its flawed premises:

> On my own head be it if, after all the years of elocution and pianoforte,
> the idea that I may have veered
>
> away from the straight
> and the narrow of Brooklyn or Baltimore for a Baltic state
>
> is one at which, all things being equal, I would demur.
> A bit like Edward VII cocking his ear

> at the mention of Cork. Yet it seems I've managed nothing more
> than to have fetched up here. (3)

'Plan B' could be read as a self-questioning interrogation of the use and function of poetic language. Alphabetically B always follows A, plan B is always a back-up to plan A and thus may never be acted on – and whoever heard of a Beta male? As such, 'Plan B,' as the title suggests, signals a strong interest in all the versions and visions that did not acquire priority in the formation of ideology, history, religion, civilisation, identity and aesthetics, and, of course, in language and literature. Many of these grand themes are collated in the seven-page poem, and cannot be easily separated from each other. The persona assumes responsibility for his waywardness, his straying away from the straight and the narrow. This is an admission that is laden with the linguistic choices, the moral responsibility and the obligations of responsive protest which exist as part of his identity, where he has now 'fetched up.' The allusion to Edward the VII's visit to Cork in 1903 brings in the historical dimension of the problematic relations between England and Ireland. However, the B of the plan also emphasises the significance of the single letter, a well-known strategy in Muldoon's poetry that is also highlighted in this volume in such a poem as '@.' In 'Plan B,' the letter B is used to impose arbitrary universality in the case of 'Brooklyn', 'Baltimore' and 'Baltic'. In this assumed secondarity of B-places, it is significant, of course, that Cork, the only Irish city, starts with a C. The B here also connects this poem to the chain of B-poems in the previous collection *Horse Latitudes*. Like the battles and deadly disease that form the focus of that series, much of 'Plan B' also centres on totalitarian suppression and torture in astonishingly perfected forms of poetry – seven poems of four couplets with intricate pararhymes – and in a highly polished language. The strong sense of death and pain in these B-verses also extend to the alliteration and structure of Muldoon's eulogy for Seamus Heaney at the 1995 Nobel Laureate's funeral in 2013.[30] Muldoon can still rhyme 'a cat with a dog' and these verses serve up pairs of rhymes such as 'catchall' and 'cudgel', 'the KGB garotte' and 'the Scythian torc', 'cyanide' and 'paid' (6–7). The series of seven sections in the poem are interlinked through the repetition at the start of each new section of the final line of the preceding one, a bit of a B-choice in prosody that Muldoon favours a lot in this volume, a poetic technique which perhaps takes its cue from the repetitive structure of 'The Alphabet Calendar of Amergin,' by Amergin, the

30 Paul Muldoon, 'Seamus Heaney's Beauty,' *The New Yorker*, 1 September 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/seamus-heaneys-beauty, accessed 17 April 2019.

first poet of Ireland.[31] This aesthetic achievement begs the standard questions of play and profundity that Kennedy-Andrews summarises so concisely, to which the final lines of the seventh section provide one imaginative response:

> I may have put
> myself above all those trampled underfoot,
>
> given my perfect deportment all those years I'd skim
> over the dying and the dead
>
> looking up to me as if I might at any moment succumb
> to the book balanced on my head. (9)

In this poignant confession of a poet's dilemma, the speaker evokes his lofty former self hemmed in between human concerns and literary ideals. The position is a difficult one to maintain, but a necessary one, as this poem and volume illustrate in their presentation of the tragic and the humorous in perfected forms and language. 'Plan B' is a poem that illustrates how language in Muldoon's poetry can hold a significance that surpasses popular critical discussions of play and profundity.

For all its profound political connotations, 'Extraordinary Rendition' is another poem that mines the possibilities of language to pinpoint Andrews' 'ethical consciousness'. The controversial practice of forced extradition, to which the title refers, has also been named 'torture by proxy' in the mass media, and has become an increased element in judicial and political discourses since the American war on terrorism and the Guantánamo controversy. But rendition also means translation and surrender, both in concrete and figurative senses, and Muldoon's poem tends to translate all the abstract rhetoric of law and politics into human terms of love and compassion, with lambent humour and erotic depth. Such an act of linguistic combat is certainly charged with political implications and ethical consciousness. The two mirroring sonnets in this poem account for the ecstatic union of two lovers who surrender themselves to each other, and who return their claims, gifts and belongings after the separation has taken place. This unexpected shift from the political implications of the title to the personal focus in the poem is one Muldoon's readers will

31 For a version of Amergin's poem and Muldoon's discussion of these verses, as well as his extremely performative exhibition of the anatomy of Irish writing, see Muldoon: *To Ireland, I*, 3–6.

recognise from previous poems such as 'The Mixed Marriage' and 'The Grand Conversation.' In 'Extraordinary Rendition' the concentration on the break-up of a personal union forefronts the human aspect that is often lost in judicial and political rhetoric. Furthermore, this personal focus augments the pain and tragedy of separation, whether it is caused by state-sponsored infringement of human rights or by other circumstances, as it can only be represented in very metaphorical language. The intimacy of their love and the torment of their separation are cast in geographical images and erotically evocative language, as if their passionate emotions and personal pain cannot be directly translated into precise words:

> I gave you back my claim on the mining town
> and the rich vein we once worked,
> the tumble down
> from a sluice box that irked
>
> you so much, the narrow gauage
> that opened up to one and all
> when it ran out at the landing stage
> beyond the falls. (78)

'Extraordinary Rendition,' particularly in this poem, also evokes ideas of unusual extraction and exceptional extrication. Thus, the conceit of gold-digging fits perfectly. These verses function as a reminder of the fact that connotations of fortune-hunting women, self-serving men and opportunity-seeking immigrants have currently appropriated the term for what used to denote the operose activity of the most adventurous pioneers of the old American West. They also displace such material and meretricious ideas: the two lovers mine each other's bodies and soul, they keep their precious memory and remnants of love, but they return their estate, belongings and profits. This concentration on emotional investment, on passion and love, balances beautifully the idea of gold-diggers. This rendition of passion and love also counteracts the emotional constraints of the career advancement on the part of the young urban professional in the preceding 'Yup,' and the emotional spendthrifts in the succeeding 'The Fling.' These three poems also reflect upon poetry and language; upon studiously learning the trade, upon impulsively writing the occasional poem, and upon the hardships of delving into profound human concerns and finding the as yet unfound metaphors, conceits, words, forms, line and sentences for rendering such concerns in remarkable poems. 'Extraordinary Rendition,' in its position, its title, its use of resourceful language, and in its political implications

and profound ethical consciousness, puts into focus the personal tragedy of extra-legal political actions, and the artistic challenges of presenting these in poetic language.

'Wayside Shrines,' the final poem in the volume, interweaves words, sounds, themes and techniques from most of the preceding poems in the volume. This accumulation is an habitual feature of all of Muldoon's poetry collections, but this finale in eleven clear-cut eleven-liners is less comprehensive and less complex than previous volume-ending crescendos. In *Maggot*, such techniques tend to be more evenly distributed across several poems, most notably in the title poem, but also several others, most in fact, from 'Plan B' to 'The Humors of Hakone' and 'The Side Project.' 'Wayside Shrines' could perhaps be described as the Route 66 or A1 *via dolorosa* or an elegy written in a roadside churchyard. Archetypes and perennial motifs of road and travel provide literary ground for Muldoon's poem, a poem that can certainly be seen as a mournful companion piece to Jack Kerouac's lively beat classic, *On the Road*. In a larger context 'Wayside Shrines' suggests a protest against the building of the new M3 in Ireland that destroyed some of the historical site of Tara in Ireland. Muldoon's poem commemorates, as the title indicates, the many accidental victims along a motorway, in history and in the present. These are the places and moments when maggots and flies are likely to reappear again and again. An earlier poem in the collection, 'The Sod Farm,' illustrates graphically one of the road casualties:

> Her car must have caught fire
> when she missed a turn
> or blew a tire
> the girl with the third-degree burns
>
> who slammed into a tree
> by the mist-shrouded sod farm.
> 40%. Third degree. (103)

'Wayside Shrines' ends on the fate of a prom queen, perhaps the same girl as in 'The Sod Farm.' 'yet the sudden failure of a break drum / extended her lease on Elysium' (120). Yet these eleven poems of eleven lines commemorate other lost lives too: 'piles of rock / marking the scene of a crash' (110), 'the beehive-hut episode' (112), 'early Irish monasticism' (117). Personal tragedy and public policies take another turn in these verses, towards the high number of people killed in road accidents, an obvious B-side of the political agenda in many places, not least during times of culture clashes in international politics. However, 'Wayside Shrines' also records its own way with form and language. In its

unusual combination of eleven lines in eleven sections, the poem retains a strong drive to keep away from old and established forms of stanza composition. The remains from previous poems in the volume serve as shrines and commemorative pieces of times past. In its very current diction, this final poem also leaves by the wayside most archaic terms or etymologies. In themes, techniques, form and language, 'Wayside Shrines' keeps alive memory, poetry and language in its novel and experimental acts of commemoration and these stanzas do so by challenging the very forms and language that have traditionally been employed for commemorative purposes: 'whatever it means to commemorate' (112). The language of 'Wayside Shrines' indicates that sorrow and mourning might assume many different and yet undefined forms and articulations.

Maggot explores many sombre aspects of the human condition, and delves into ethical questions of both the humanistic and 'p@stmodernist' type – frequently by very defamiliarising metaphors and language. Among many imaginative possibilities, politicised discourses and ethical concerns, *Maggot* highlights a wriggling way with words and writing. Maggots are natural creatures in the processes of death and renewal – well-known challenges to creators of literature and language – and in relation to the critical question of playfulness and profundity in Muldoon's poetry. This volume frequently questions that very question. At least since Aristotle's *Poetics*, the comic and the entertaining have taken second place to the tragic and the serious, and language a tertiary position. Muldoon tends to reverse this order and to annul its distinctions. He is a poet who takes the comic and the humorous very seriously, and who reaches towards a deeper understanding of the complexity of the tragic and the serious. The language of Muldoon's poetry is essential to these excursions into the profound and the playful and the 'p@stmodernist'. After a century of linguistic turns from Saussure and Wittgenstein to Searle, Derrida and beyond, Muldoon's poetry is one that takes seriously the fact that language is unpredictable, troublesome, contradictory and forever shifting, and that the explorations of its disorderly phenomena bear upon social order, thought systems and the human condition.

CHAPTER 12

One Thousand Things Worth Knowing

'No better place to start than with the Mescalero girl / who refers to moral // turpitude as moral *turpentine*' (117), runs an incomplete sentence in 'Dirty Data,' the final alterative in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. In their sense-stopping syntax, dispersed line- and stanza arrangement, linguistic confusion and conspicuous italicisation, these verses on the rebellious Amerinidian girl exhibit familiar Muldonic themes and techniques. The title signals a p@stmodernist poem, in which ICT appears as both poetic framework and topic. The ICT component and the confusion between 'moral turpitude' and 'moral *turpentine*' highlight the scrutiny of knowledge and language the characterises this volume. The balance between them is uneven. Epistemological quandaries tend to outweigh linguistic conundrums as the principal focus of *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. The title signals lucidly this shift in aesthetic orientation. That epistemology challenges the imperative of language in his latest volume from 2015 proposes a distinctive reason for Ben Wilkinson's scathing critique. Judging Muldoon by his own standards, Wilkinson deems *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* rock bottom in a continual decline: 'In this often manic hall of mirrors where language and trivia run about, cartoon-like, to a soundtrack of canned laughter and the odd sentimental tune, things seem mainly to go from bad to worse, albeit by the perilously high standards of the Muldoon glory days. Paul Muldoon so rarely gets to any kind of point in this book.'[1] Yet John McAuliffe finds that 'the weirdness of his linguistic adventure cannot be overstated.'[2] When language assumes a secondary role in Muldoon's poetry, that of the practical function of mediation, the poems lose much of their Shklovskyan estrangement, Adornian radicalism and Derridean discontent. This new parity of esteem in artistic performance between knowledge and language draws attention to another aspect of Muldoon's p@stmodernism: language is no longer the sole predicate. Nevertheless, his linguistic adventures still create an impression of 'weirdness' upon readers, although some critics, Wilkinson in particular, are disgruntled when they judge

1 Ben Wilkinson, 'The Three Ages of Muldoon,' *The Poetry Review* 105, no. 1 (2015), http://www.benwilkinson.org/2015/07/the-three-ages-of-muldoon-paul-muldoons.html, accessed 5 April 2019.

2 John McAuliffe, 'Paul Muldoon: One Thousand Things Worth Knowing,' *The Irish Times*, 25 January 2015, http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/paul-muldoon-one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-1.2077275, accessed 17 April 2019.

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Muldoon by his own standards. The judgement that Muldoon 'rarely gets to any kind of point in this book,' smacks more of ignorance than knowledge. It's far more likely that Wilkinson is too set on grand ideas, or that he misses many of the points – they are legion, certainly more than one thousand when hermeneutic imagination is activated. Furthermore, Wilkinson's use of 'glory days' as a main criterion of evaluation for new volumes of poetry appears illogical and unreasonable: language, poetry, knowledge and their many relations and contexts change continuously.

Muldoon's twelfth and most recent volume of poetry from Faber and Faber in 2015 – and his publication number thirty-something if you include pamphlets, plays, libretti, criticism, rock lyric volumes, collaborations, selected and collected books – broadens the range and reach of his oeuvre in myriad ways, chiefly in an epistemological direction, while it simultaneously retains a hyper-reflective consciousness of language. The title affirms Muldoon's omnivorous appetite for knowledge of all kinds: biology, technology, history, philosophy, mythology, art, literature and language, and, of course, his appetite for arcana, liminality and narthecality, and for 'the esoteric,' 'the pied,' 'the cryptic, the encoded, the runic and the virtually unintelligible,' to mention some domains.[3] Long lists of poems in *Maggot* and in his previous poetry develop from detailed knowledge of birds, plants and animals of all kinds, horses in particular. Technological solutions and gadgets known from previous volumes – from electricity in 'The Electric Garden' (*NW*, 1–2), radio in 'The Radio Horse' (*NW*, 21) and remote control in 'Yarrow' (*AC*, 39–189) to the Foley effect in 'The Key' (*Mad*, 3–4) and information technology in 'Hard Drive' (MSG, 3) and '@' (*Mag*, 74) – reinforce the language, shape, theme, metaphorical and asymmetrical qualities of his poems in this volume too. Histories of Northern/Ireland and the Amerindians and historical events and individuals are richly interwoven. Philosophical dispute and ethical dilemma vie for attention in many verses. Several poems reflect, refract and recreate mythic figures and stories, primarily Irish and classical ones. Incorporation of arts of all kinds, as well as literature from the canon and the works of Muldoon and Heaney and others, forms an intrinsic dimension of the volume. As in his previous Faber collections, Muldoon creates his quoof, italicette, alterratives, narrathanotographies and p@stmodernism. 'The most formally ambitious and technically innovative of modern poets, he writes poems like no one else,' fellow poet and critic Nick Laird avows.[4] *Madoc*, this mythic and monstrous alterrative and science fictional nightmare with retinascan and a speaking horse

3 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 5.

4 Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon'.

that questions Western metaphysics in a template of American history and multireferentiality, appears as the unappeasable text of Muldoon's language-driven and knowledge-hunting animus. *Maggot,* its sibling in titular chime and syllabic similarity, and in specified knowledge and lingual complexity, continues in up-dated modes many of the same techniques. Muldoon excels in knowledge and language. That knowledge and language are important to poetry, is far from new. Samuel Johnson famously points to some of the forefathers in Muldoon's 'polycentric pedigree' in derogatory terms:

> The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and, to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and, very often, such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables … The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.[5]

Dr. Johnson, like Addison in his condemnation of 'false wit,' denigrates many of the poets by whom Muldoon is inspired.[6] It is no accident that Muldoon hardly ever, if at all, mentions any poets from the Enlightenment era in all his peregrinations in poetics. He does, on the other hand, praise the metaphysical poets that Dr. Johnson denounces, particularly Donne, for his use of the demotic, and for 'The Flea' – 'one of the poems that makes me think poetry is a truly astonishing art form, and sends me in search of more.'[7] Muldoon indulges in aspects of poetry Dr. Johnson views firmly with disfavour, including the vices or virtues of eclectic knowledge and linguistic multivalence, and he frequently does so to an extraordinary extent. His knowledge intermittently appears more acquired and cognitive than lived and empirical, which is exactly one of the fortes of his poetry. Why is there often such a demand for the understandable,

5 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, vol. 1 (London: C. Bathurst et al., 1781), 27.

6 Addison, 'True and False Wit.'

7 Ligaya Mishan, 'Besieged: A Live Chat with Paul Muldoon,' *The New Yorker*, 30 October 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/books/book-club/besieged-a-live-chat-with-paul-muldoon, accessed 17 April 2019. See also Dan Eltringham and Kit Toda, 'Paul Muldoon Interview (Part 2),' *The Literateur* (2009), http://literateur.com/paul-muldoon-interview-part-2/, accessed 17 April 2019.

accessible or palpable in a poem? Why should not one valuable point of poetry be to inspire search for knowledge? Why should not poems inspire further research? Into knowledge of all kinds, as much as into language, literature and arts? John Carey, who berated Muldoon's language in 'The Stain of Words' also upbraided his knowledge in the same article for 'arcane, allusive poetry, packed to the gunwales with higher education.'[8] Evidently, new words and new knowledge appear as anathema to this professor. Kelsey Osgood, a – much younger? – writer and scholar, displays more humility and resourcefulness in pursuit of learning and language. In her earnest, entertaining and encouraging re-review of *Maggot* she surmounts the threshold of difficulty and allusion that seems to act as a barrier for many reviewers and at least one professor (Carey), to enter the much larger and rewarding room beyond. She also points to all the rooms without threshold:

> I'm reminded – somewhat unhappily – of the hours I spent up in my hot attic room in Brooklyn first reading *Maggot*, then flitting back and forth between *Maggot* and my enormous, podium-supported OED, and then finally tapping a pencil against my forehead and thinking, "F*#& it, f*#& it" over and over again in a fatalistic refrain. Still, though, the lighter moments of my dalliance with Muldoon also come to mind.[9]

Osgood explores, through poetic analyses and debate with other reviewers, Muldoon's poetry from a far more productive premise than Carey's:

> Complete understanding should not be the goal here … Rather the ideal ambition is a deepening of one's own knowledge and an opening to the idea that Muldoon's work can serve as a catalyst for acquiring facts and stories irreverent, useless and profound all.[10]

Her conclusion concentrates on a broad-minded responsiveness to some of the epistemological, etymological, ontological and jocoserious strands in the learning and language of Muldoon's poetry:

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8 Carey, 'The Stain of Words,' 56.

9 Kelsey Osgood, 'Worth Repeating: *Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *Baltimore Review*, 18 September 2012, http://baltimorereview.org/index.php/blog/post/worth-repeating-maggot-by-paul-muldoon, accessed 17 April 2019.

10 Ibid.

> Some mysteries shall remain, such as whether "trampled underfoot" was a direct nod to British rock group Led Zeppelin by the erstwhile librettist and guitar player Muldoon, or if Chazon Ish really was concerned with the etymology of "dork" (doubtful) but one thing is for sure: Maggot [sic] can (but doesn't have to) be the portal into the wider world of Celtic folklore and the history of sideshows. It is an at times gross and difficult challenge such as life, or in Muldoon's words, a "shit storm/ through a bloody stream/ in which every morning the water again runs clear," the clarity of which you ultimately control.[11]

Osgood's intellectual temperament and linguistic openness constitute a proper antidote to cognitive inertia, linguistic indolence and professorial arrogance. In fact, Muldoon's title, *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, could, as Osgood's re-review demonstrates so lucidly, also be read as a riposte to the limited remit of academic analysis of poetry – not only Carey's – in which the classical often outweighs the contemporary, the canonical eclipses the current, and the professorial trumps the popular. Osgood has learnt from both worlds, and others, and is eager to enlarge her knowledge, language, wisdom and life.

Not all reviewers agree with Osgood in general, and certainly not when it comes to *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. 'Muldoon anticipates incomprehension in places,' states Charlotte Runice.[12] Other reviewers also differ with Osgood about the knowledge and language in the volume. Ann van Buren delineates concisely the knowledge and the uncertainty of the volume: 'Boyish wonder meets a cynical intelligence. Playfulness and seriousness blur to one and the same … In these poems, we are destined not to know for sure.'[13] Others have reservations, but their interpretative points of view tend to reinforce Muldoon's central position in contemporary poetry. 'If Auden was a guidebook, Muldoon is a scientific journal,' asserts James Marriot and continues, 'indeed, *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* often feels like *Mercian Hymns* on acid. Rather like Hill, Muldoon has developed a late style rich in opaque allusion and incomprehensible reference.'[14] Many reviewers, naturally, draw parallels

11 Ibid.

12 Charlotte Runcie, 'Review of *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*,' *The Telegraph*, 13 January 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11337479/One-Thousand-Things-Worth-Knowing-by-Paul-Muldoon-review.html, accessed 17 April 2019.

13 Ann Van Buren, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Rumpus* (2015), http://therumpus.net/2015/05/one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-by-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

14 James Marriott, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Literateur* (2015), http://literateur.com/one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-by-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

and contrasts with Seamus Heaney, and with Muldoon himself. The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* writes: 'All the pointers to earlier work, and to uncommon knowledge, make it less than ideal (except for the Heaney elegy) as an entry point to the Muldooniverse, but it's powerful nonetheless, with witty pleasures and strong feelings to be unlocked and cherished.'[15] More astutely, John Lavin registers that the challenge of Muldoon's poetry is not so much past and present fellow poets as the dramatic development of information technology: 'Paul Muldoon's latest work bombards the senses with information. This is true of all of his collections but the difference on this occasion is that the by-now-familiar-blitzkrieg invokes an opposing kind of knowledge saturation: that which is proffered by the Internet.'[16]

In Muldoon's own epistemological view, as his response below to a question from an audience reveals, knowing cannot be thought without unknowing. The main realm of the unknown is the spiritual dimension – the metaphysical realm beyond empirical facts, instrumental expertise and applied intelligence, the realm and sphere Addison and Dr. Johnson tend to exclude as criteria in their assessment of most eminent poets. Muldoon explains:

> Another article of faith (which I touched on briefly) has to do with unknowing, and that, I think, connects it to many experiences that could be described as "spiritual" experiences, and I know you are all familiar with those, where one has a sense of giving oneself over to something beyond oneself, something one doesn't quite understand; and only when one does that, and only in a spirit of humility, is there half a chance that one will come out the other side *knowing* anything at all in some minor way. So I think I am really pleased that you enter these discussions in the spirit of unknowing, because that is the spirit in which we all engage in the business of trying to write poems.[17]

'It's what you don't know that makes you wiser,' one might add. The acquisition of knowledge and the mapping of unknowledge are significant to the act of poetry. Epistemological questioning becomes as important as language philosophy. However, if language was merely referential, the metaphysical

15 AA, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*,' *Publishers Weekly* (2014), http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-374-22712-8, accessed 17 April 2019.

16 John Lavin, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon,' *Wales Arts Review* (2015), http://www.walesartsreview.org/poetry-one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-by-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

17 Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon.'

dimension would be the most challenging to render in language. To approach the unknowable requires all dimensions of language. An undefined language that inverts, undermines, questions and speculates upon its own mysteries, flaws and incomprehensibility suits better a grappling with the metaphysical, the spiritual, the unknowable and the unsayable than a language confined by referentiality, logical concatenation, communication and rationality only.

Still, knowable knowledge needs to be correct and verifiable in the first place for a number of reasons. First of all, all Muldoon's catalogues of biological facts, historical events, technological details and erudite knowledge of literature and the arts exist as a distinct acclamatory aspect of his poetry. Knowledge is attractive. It is what we do not know that makes us wiser. Secondly, for a poet to be taken seriously in matters of spirit, soul, ethics and metaphysical dilemma, facts, dates, empiricism and physical phenomena need to be valid and verifiable. Thirdly, Muldoon often makes use of hard science, technology, history and information for imaginative purposes, as poems from The 'Radio Horse' (*NW*, 21) and 'Madoc' (*Mad*, 13–261) to 'The Humors of Hakone' (*Mag*, 63–72) and '@' (*Mag*, 74) make clear. Furthermore, Muldoon's poetry often records the philological aspects, imaginative dimensions, hidden cultural equations and the B-sides of the historical record in his tracings of the contours of knowledge. The p@stmodernist '@' epitomises such explorations of knowledge at a contemporary twenty-first century moment when language and knowledge tend to be formatted by information and communication technologies. Transformations in media, communication and language always confine and change contents, message and our understanding of what knowledge is. And language. The transformations of the ICT-revolution of the last decades confirm and constrict as much as they mediate and distribute knowledge, communication and language. *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* reacts and relates to the contemporary technological contours of knowledge and communication in the current world in which we live.

In *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Condillac argues against ideality from Plato to Descartes, and for the importance of language to knowledge. Today's information and communication technology creates continuously new languages, novel technological knowledge and increasingly smarter systems of communication. Information and communication technology (ICT), a generic term for the application of computers, telephones, radio, television and similar devices for storing and distributing facts, knowledge and information, marks the revolution of the postmodern world. ICT creates continuously new programming languages, from A+ via Pascal to Zeno, and, apparently, provides boundless space for knowledge. Knowledge can hardly be conceived of without language and the language of ICT and PCs confirms conventional

structures of writing, speaking and thinking. 'The history of thought is the history of its models,' Frederic Jameson asserts, and explores how structural language, including the 'electronic field' and 'the computer,' arrived as a new model that leaped from organising our understanding of the world to a model that, supposedly, illuminates the human condition.[18] This default of structuralism in any system, such as language, electronic fields, computers and ICT, ultimately confines and closes the possibilities of language. Derrida's idea of *grammatology*, his philosophical attempt to open up the past to new knowledge and to radically change the future by questioning the structures of language, thought and knowledge, also incorporates admonitions of technological formation in his critique of Western metaphysics:

> By alluding to a science of writing reined in by metaphor, metaphysics and theology, this exergue must not only announce that the science of writing – *grammatology* – shows signs of liberation all over the world, as a result of decisive efforts. These efforts are necessarily discreet, dispersed, almost imperceptible; that is a quality of their meaning and of their milieu within which they produce their operation. I would like to suggest above all that, however fecund and necessary the undertaking might be, and even if, given the most favourable hypothesis, it did overcome all *technical* [my emphasis] and epistemological obstacles as well as all the theological and metaphysical impediments that have limited it hitherto, such a science of writing runs the risk of never being established as such with that name.[19]

It seems ironic that more or less at the same time as Jameson and Derrida disclose and deconstruct the closure of epistemological systems and language structures, the ICT-revolution solidifies yet again the old paradigms of constrictive cognition and confirmatory language. The whole communication system of ICT would collapse without binary codes and the hardware of information technology manifests in material matter the delimitation of the apparent infinite space of information and knowledge this technology facilitates. ICT facilitates fascinating speed, daily convenience, interactive entertainment and vast resources of facts, knowledge and information, including encyclopedias and dictionaries. Nevertheless, ICT not only confirms old structures and paradigms. Information superhighways also flatten old topographies of language and

18 Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), v.

19 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4.

knowledge, and leave behind, like wayside shrines, values and wisdom, words, incongruities, irony and idioms, the tertiary and the plural, the aberrant, the different and the deviant. Metaphorically speaking, not least with Muldoon's early and very haunting poem 'Hedgehog' (*NW*, 27) in mind, the superhighways of information threaten many linguistic beasts and creatures of learning. ICT stimulates and satisfies the search for knowledge. ICT might organise our daily life, like an hour glass organises sand. ICT might offer one thousand and one things worth knowing, but, as Muldoon's poetry in this volume is aware of, it does not illuminate the human condition and it leaves many forms of language and knowledge behind.

Literature comes with the power to break out of Jameson's prison-house of language, and with the endeavour of Derrida's grammatology to open up foreclosed horizons of predominant technical, epistemological, theological and metaphysical paradigms. Writing by Joyce, Mallarmé, Ponge, Robbe-Grillet, Peréc, Shakespeare, Sterne, Valery and other creative authors challenges ordinary constructions of language and cognition in Jameson's critical account of structuralism and Russian Formalism, and in large strata of Derrida's philosophy – not least *Acts of Literature*. Writing, these 'discreet, dispersed, almost imperceptible' and 'decisive efforts,' sometimes breaks open its own constituent language, and frequently cracks open ideological structures, religious regulations, patterns of thought and the fundamentals of applied science, in its restive powers of anomaly and protean mutability. 'To discover through language some little revision, however slight' and 'to change, to be changed,' Muldoon responds to a question on 'what for you might be the main aim or function of writing?'[20] His answer manifest itself in the poematic and theological and metaphysical critique in 'Hedgehog' and the linguistic quandary of 'Quoof.' It finds expression in the 'decisive efforts' of language, and in his philological supplements to the ICT revolution from 'Hard Drive' (MSG, 3) and '@' (*Mag*, 74) to 'Dirty Data' (99–119) in this volume. Muldoon's interventions include. the full gamut of Muldoonisms, alterratives, multirratives and narrathanotographies so abundant in his work. A poetry that incessantly submits to scrutiny the sign, the word, poetry and writing, will also deliver to critique the surrounding discourses, reality and knowledge with which it interacts so imaginatively.

The Enlightenment always appears as the *bête-noir* and the butt of *phallogocentric* critique in two of the last millennium's most enlightened thinkers, Foucault and Derrida. *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* could to some extent

20 Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' 7.

be regarded as the poetic phalanx of such paradigmatic critique. The title strikes an uncanny note of appreciation and weariness, almost a sense of lethargy on the part of an avid but intelligent collector. Why, ultimately, is the collection of facts important? What facts? What are the relations of facts to information, knowledge, rationality and wisdom? And thinking? How do organisation of facts and models of knowledge, language and thinking structure individual life, social formations and intellectual activity? Does any of this alleviate the exigencies of the global situation or the quandaries on human existence? Knowledge is of great importance to Muldoon's poetic endeavour, as his insatiable, omnivorous appetite, especially for the recondite and recherché, make evident throughout his entire *oeuvre*. The recollection of the forgotten, the overlooked and the superceded balances with the engagements with the new. His sense of rationality includes a spiritual dimension, but refrains from any sense of metaphysical redemption. He declares decisively: 'The sense of "redress" Seamus Heaney has in mind is associated with a spiritual aspect to poetry and also with some idea that poetry may bring salvation. I go along with him on the first but balk, I fear, at the second.'[21] Muldoon is also acutely aware of the institutions of thought and language with which poetry interacts with circumspection: 'one of the things poetry has been asked to do, and I wonder if it's not unreasonably asked to do, is to stand in for various other institutionalised systems of moral force, most notably of course organised religion.'[22] Muldoon's spiritual aspect, 'where one has a sense of giving oneself over to something beyond oneself, something one doesn't quite understand,' might lie in language itself as his many comments on his faithfulness to language make explicit: 'the only state in which I think anything half-decent might get done is to be humble before the power and possibility of language, to let it have its way with you, as it were.'[23] 'I think one can only be faithful to the language and the way in which it presents itself to you,' 'I am in awe of language.'[24] 'I am a medium for the poem, it's really not about me.'[25] Knowledge and unknowing correspond with language, and its power and mystery. These are the larger dimensions of philosophy and spirituality with which *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* interacts, but Muldoon would prefer by far not to act up or to play the

21 Mishan, 'Besieged: A Live Chat with Paul Muldoon.'

22 Eltringham and Toda, 'Paul Muldoon Interview (Part 2),' http://literateur.com/paul-muldoon-interview-part-2/, accessed 17 April 2019.

23 Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 27.

24 Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 133–137.

25 Eltringham and Toda, 'Paul Muldoon Interview (Part 2).'

maggot if the book did not also have a much more specific anchorage than these metanarratives.

One Thousand Things Worth Knowing also takes its title from a very popular tradition, from all trivial pursuit and questions and answers of games and magazines. One possible touchstone for Muldoon's title is the 1000 selected questions from the *Q and A* page of Pearson's Weekly published by C. Arthur Pearson in 1905: *1000 Curious Things Worth Knowing*. An obscure book, *1000 Things Worth Knowing* published in 1913 by Nathaniel C. Fowler Jr., suggests another source of associations. As a handbook of facts and information this alphabetically ordered anthology of the accessible and the informative appears as a combination of an encyclopaedia and a self-help book in pocket format. Its author/editor and publisher, Nathaniel C. Fowler Jr., generated a veritable assembly line of such companions, and wrote a quite a few of them himself, including *The Art of Story Writing*. An apothegm that borders on the realms of epistemological quest, practical information and unintended hilarity meets the reader on the first page *of 1000 Things Worth Knowing*: 'To find what you want consult the Index.' Veteran readers of Muldoon, and perhaps Muldoon himself, will appreciate the deadpan humour of satisfying desire and assuaging the human predicament by lexical reference, and the humorous absurdity of starting from the end in order to arrive at the right place. The index takes you to sections of edifying and entertaining knowledge. From 'Abbreviations in Common Use' to 'Yankee Doodle,' but nothing really worth knowing under Z, the book sports entries such as 'Errors of History,' 'Failures,' and 'Famous Diamonds;' 'Seasickness' and 'Seven Deadly Sins;' 'Sub Rosa,' 'Sunday Schools' and 'Talking Machines.' It contains lists of 'Presidents of the United States,' 'Principal Countries in the World' and 'Sporting, Speed and Other Records.' 'What to do in Emergencies' takes up 45 pages. Smack full of biblical, classical, economic, mathematical, pathological and philological facts and figures, as well as survival instructions, the book hosts specific facts that are matters of well-established historical record. Nevertheless, many of the entries ring with a surprising contemporary topicality: 'Calculating Interest,' 'Coal Industry,' 'Climate and Temperature.' Metaphorical implications for our 21st century condition add further intellectual allure to the 'provocative propinquity' and 'felicitous fusions' of alphabetic orderin of arbitrary facts.[26] Fowler Jr.'s Preface states:

> This book contains more than one thousand facts, many of which are not generally known to the average person; but all of them are of interest to humankind, and a knowledge of many of them is essential.

26 Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Beasts*, xvi.

> The author has used the simplest English, and has avoided, as far as possible, all technical or scientific terms. He has endeavored not to fall into the common error of making his explanations harder to understand than the subjects treated.
> This book is not intended for the scientist, nor does it claim to be exhaustive.
> In the space of a few hundred pages the writer has presented the thousand or more things which are really worth knowing, and which are usually described at unprofitable length and without that simplicity of expression so essential to clearness.[27]

This fortuitous meeting of state statistics, general human interest and boy scout handbook between two covers – a personal companion (PC) of its day and a time capsule for our time – bears upon Muldoon's poetry and his own *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* in a large number of ways beyond those already indicated in the lines above. Muldoon's very direct allusion to Fowler Jr.'s mini-encyclopaedia pays ambivalent tribute to the legacies of the enlightenment era, particularly to the intellectual ambitions and industry of encyclopedias. Fowler Jr.'s book arrives as a manifestation of enlightenment spirit in a popular format, a democratisation of elitist and financially exclusive grand encyclopedias, on the very eve of the destruction wrought by the First World War. Its content and context once again raise many critical questions: what is worth knowing? Why? For whom? According to which criteria? Who decides? What is left out? And does knowledge really help us to tackle the human condition of civic disaster and existential quandary? Critical questions from anti-positivist, ethnic, feminist and post-structuralist positions have, especially since the Second World War, beset the enlightenment legacy. Since Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger's introduction of Wikipedia in 2001 these questions are more relevant than ever. Anthologies of all kinds beg the same critical questions in the realm of literature.[28] One dimension of Muldoon's oeuvre and his latest volume of poetry reads like a homage to knowledge, irrespective of all concomitant critical questions.

27 Nathaniel C. Fowler Jr., *1000 Things Worth Knowing* (New York: Sully and Kleinteich, 1913), Preface, https://archive.org/details/thingsworthknow01fowlgoog, accessed 17 April 2019.

28 'Anthologies, as you know, are minefields. The reviews of every anthology by and large comprise alternate anthologies that the reviewer would produce,' Muldoon responds to Kevin Barry on a question on the reception of his own *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986). Derek Mahon stated in his review of this anthology that he hoped it would sink without a trace and that Muldoon would live to regret its publication. Kevin Barry, 'Q and A.: Paul Muldoon,' *The Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall) 1987, 37.

Muldoon's unstoppable pursuit of knowledge seems to be a life-time venture. Literature, naturally, occupies an important place in his métier – all of his books and essays on literature, his critical reviews and his teaching as well as his poetry demonstrate his expertise in this domain – but other fields appear to hold equal appeal to his autodidactic sensibility: 'I'm pretty interested in general knowledge, and science and arcane knowledge. Much more interested in that than I am in Literature with a capital *L*. Or at least as interested.'[29] This interest of his goes back as least as far as his submersion in language. He reveled in the *Junior World Encyclopedia* as a child, and praises this fountain of facts as 'a terrific read from aardvark on.'[30] His adult learning has taken on broader dimensions still. The metaphysical and spiritual assume priority, but the physical and scientific are important too: 'I rely on stepping into the unknown, of course. But I'm also relying on some basic laws of physics. And maybe chemistry.'[31] Muldoon, as all great thinkers, shows humility and respect for the vastness of knowledge: 'Anyway, what I'm saying is: how little one knows.'[32] Respect for the unknown and incertitude in crucial questions are aspects of life and thought that Muldoon finds commendable but less common in our day and age: 'This culture, or one's age, does not honour uncertainty. Right? One of the things I like about Obama is that he says, "Well let me think about that…" and, "I'm not sure of the answer to that yet." Which I think is a great thing for anyone to say.'[33] Lack of knowledge proves as important to poetry, his own and others', as knowledge. Unknowability becomes a source of creativity tantamount to humility before language: 'Great poems come from that area: ignorance.'[34] Furthermore, Muldoon is also apprehensively fascinated by how much more he could actually know about eggs, chicken, sausages, avocado and coffee; he comments upon how much he has learned from his cooperation with Warren Zevon; he emphasises the importance of knowledge and ignorance in teaching; and he points to the fact-check of poems in the *New Yorker*.[35] Finally, a narrathanotographic self-alertness to the degeneration of cognitive faculties bears upon the endduring zeal for facts, fiction and the unknown:

29 Wilson, 'Paul Muldoon, The Art of Poetry,' 72.

30 Ibid., 53.

31 Ibid., 71.

32 Alice Whitwham, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' *The White Review* (July 2013), http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

> I mean, the fact is, whether or not one writes poems, we're all, as we age, getting duller and duller in most instances. One's brain functions less and less effectively. And that's not a matter of opinion, that's a matter of fact. So, whereas there is the engagement with the unconscious, you need to have all your wits about you, and you're losing them all the time.[36]

One Thousand Things Worth Knowing obviously deals with knowledge. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, not least in view of the title and the types of knowledge employed for multiple purposes in previous volumes, these poems, like '@' in the previous volume, attend primarily to philological knowledge, and very little to expertise in other fields, such as the plethora of birds and beasts, the historical knowledge and the technological science – not least in 'The Humors of Hakone' – in the preceding *Maggot*. Knowledge in humanist disciplines informs *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. 'Cuthbert and the Otters,' Muldoon's elegy for Heaney, reveals layers of insight into Heaney's poetics and into the history and myth of the Celtic tradition of Christianity. Ekphrastic poems – 'Charles Émile Jacque: *Poultry Among Trees*,' 'Barrage Balloons, Buck Alec, Bird Flu, and You,' 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower* II,' 'Camille Pissarro: *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte*' – take their inspiration, idea and form from paintings. 'Seven Selfies from the Château d'If' gives this tradition of rendering the spirit of the sister art in written form a contemporary Muldoonesque twist.[37] 'Anonymous: from "Marban and Duaire"' ensues from the long tradition of translating into Anglo-Irish the tenth-Celtic poem about the seventh-century historical figures also known as 'Hermit and King.' 'Pip and Magwitch,' 'A Night on the Tiles with J.C. Mangan,' 'Fredrico García Lorca: "Death,"' 'Álvaro de Campos: "Belfast, 1922,"' 'Cuba (2),' 'Paul Muldoon: "Pompeii"' and 'Seven Selfies from the Château d'If' highlight the inter- and intra-poetic currents that characterise the textual confluence in Muldonic verse, whether such lines of literary learning are highlighted by title, as in these examples, or not, as in so many other verses. 'A Civil War Suit' stages a battle between visual art and verse,

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36 Wilson, 'Paul Muldoon, the Art of Poetry,' 90.

37 For ekphrastic tendencies in Irish poetry, see Moi, '"Drawn by the Coluor and Light": Ekphrases and Aesthetics in the Poetics of Derek Mahon,' 181–197; Johnson, 'The Adoration of the Maggot,' 261–281; Rui Homem, '"Private Relations": Selves, Poems, and Paintings – Durcan to Morrissey,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 282–297; Neil Corcoron, 'Modern Irish Poetry and the Visual Arts: Yeats to Heaney,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 251–266; Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Edna Longley, 'No More Poems About Paintings?' in *The Living Stream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), 227–252.

between ekphrasis and inter-poeticality, between Muldoon and the rest, on the rendition of war in aesthetic form. In this volume, perhaps more substantially than in any other, Muldoon draws attention to 'the spiritual experiences,' 'something beyond oneself, something one doesn't quite understand,' the unknown and all the knowledge that progressively gets lost, like wayside shrines, in today's many transitions in technology, especially information technology, and in the rapid transformations in language and ideological discourses.[38]

The title of Muldoon's latest poetry volume, in its concentration on knowledge and its direct reference to Fowler Jr.'s companion, implies a reorientation in Muldoon's latest book towards whatever the words, grammar and linguistic phenomena might gesture, and away from introspective and dictionarial reclusiveness. Its focus on humanist knowledge pays homage to ways of thinking and artistic articulation that risk obsolescence and disappearance in the current transitions to the immense possibilities of new models and media of knowledge, for example all the books and scripts that are waylaid in the transition from paper culture to digital infostreams. It is indicative that Wikipedia and Google return very little information on Nathaniel C. Fowler Jr. and his book. This knowledge, as much else in Muldoon's poetry and this volume, stems from sources that tend to be excluded from the present models of 'the history of thought.'[39] Muldoon's book, as always, incorporates abundant allusions and vast ranges of reference. However, the adoption of Fowler Jr.'s book as a likely point of departure suggests in Muldoon's latest volume a change in ambition and circumference away from the poetic agglutination of philosophy, history and literature in such madcap multirratives as *Madoc*, characterised by speculative forays across the realms of language and semiosis, to a more approachable understanding of knowledge and language. Knowledge could be unknown, abstruse, hidden and arcane, but it also comes in a variety of forms, and can also be known, available, heartfelt and accessible.

Muldoon's poetry not only abounds in knowledge, as his many comments upon the topic articulate so precisely, his poems also brim with the *questioning* of knowledge. 'Knowing My Place,' his pamphlet from 1971, circles around the placing of the subject in geography, culture, knowledge and language. 'Who's to know what's knowable?' asks the girl in 'Our Lady of Ardboe' (*M*, 26), an early poem on quotidian life and religious revelation. 'This much I know,' affirms the persona twice in a self-reserved mode in 'Hay' (*H*, 52). 'Go figure' is the command of the last words in the cryptic 'Rune' (*H*, 96). 'A Collegelands

38 Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon.'

39 Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, v.

Catechism' (MSG, 15–16) dwells upon trivial questions and religious inquiry. 'Riddle' (*HL*, 76–78) probes into language, communication and various modes of reticence. 'Maybe you'll give me a sign?' asks the final line in 'Love Poem with Pig' (*Mag*, 73). '*Riddle-me-O / Riddle-me-O*,' runs the non-responsive refrain in 'Flags and Emblems' (*HL*, 49), a poem that questions the personal morals of paramilitary commitment. *Watchtower 2* and 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower* II,' the jacket image by Muldoon's fellow Belfast artist Rita Duffy and his own ekphrastic poem, cast knowledge in the political and military context of surveillance, secrecy and peril: who collects what type of information on whom for what purposes? It takes little imagination to transpose such crucial dilemmas of human rights and defence of the realm to new technologies of surveillance, and to current conflicts on a national and global scale. The stating, searching and questioning of knowledge reach a high point in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. And one of the things worth knowing, perhaps the thing, is language.

Language remains a fascinating and intriguing aspect of Muldoon's poetry. Although this volume appears to be Muldoon's least language-driven one to date, he still knows his language and this tendency of knowing marks a difference in his oeuvre: Muldoon tends to acknowledge the resources and possibilities of language more than exploring its mines and pitfalls in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. Poems in this volume question the line less, offer hardly any wh-sentences, spin fewer one-sentence poetic formations, reduce ergative syntax and employ less arcane vocabulary. No poem examines, exploits or exaggerates the significance of the single letter, the semiosis of a particular sign or the peculiarities of a particular linguistic phenomenon. Very few of the titles, if any, focus attention exclusively on language. Possible exceptions could be: 'We Love the Horse Because Its Haunch' in its curtailed syntax; '*Los Dissidents*' for its use of Spanish and perplexing italics; 'To Market, to Market' through its prepositional repetition and, perhaps, 'Required Fields' and 'Dirty Data' in their employment of ICT-terminology and in their reference to the continual revolution that creates, changes and stores our knowledge and language. Nevertheless, Muldoon's ways with language are still of salient importance. One lambent feature is how idioms and colloquialisms almost unnoticeably centre on how we relate to knowledge in our daily speech. 'Notwithstanding the fact,' states the very first line and '*Diseart* meaning "a hermitage"' explains another line in the opening elegy for Seamus Heaney, 'Cuthbert and the Otters' (1, 4). This factual focus and the furnishing of explanations set the tone for the volume's engagement with empirical knowledge and philology, its forays into spiritual speculation and its concomitant enlightenment scepticism. Slang and science clash in conversation: 'Though you may dismiss as utter tosh / my

theory' (27). A long string of phrases throughout the verses records surety, ambivalence, uncertainty, dissimulation and a circle of moods and modes of knowledge that are adopted in our common talk: 'there's no denying' (27), 'Am I right in thinking that…' (27), 'I don't suppose' (27), 'I'm pretty sure' (34, 62), 'He made me think' (34), 'I doubt'(41), I suppose' (41, 63), 'If there's a balance' (64), 'Bear in mind' (69, 70), 'Who would have guessed' (70), 'It seems' (71). Towards the end of the book such remarks assume an increasing ascendancy and degree of conviction, almost as a result of accumulated knowledge from the previous poetic colloquies in the book: 'That's why' (81, 111, 116), 'I am sure' (89), 'That's right' (99, 103, 105, 108, 110, 113, 116), 'I'm fully aware,' 'I'm well aware,' 'I'm also well aware' (116). 'While knowing in my bones' (80), reverberates with the biblical knowledge of torture and crucifixion in David's messianic psalm 22, and with Muldoon's own foretelling of poetry to come in his debut volume: 'Yet by my broken bones / I tell new weather' (*NW*, 3). Some of the expressions achieve proverbial status. 'Earth is to all ye know as done is to dusted' (46), sounds like a catachrestic *memento mori* of knowledge and life with poetic and prosaic echoes. 'The utter / necessity of sin for self-knowledge' (36), gathers in a single sentence the orthodox condemnation of humanism from the Edenic fall to the vilification of Rousseau's *Confessions* and beyond. There is wisdom too, for poets, readers and critics: 'The best poems, meanwhile, give the answers / to questions only they have raised' (73). Knowledge is diverse in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, as is the language upon which this diversity of expertise, wisdom and scepticism is predicated.

Sound continues as a particular type of linguistic knowledge and capability in Muldoon's poetry. By talent and training, Muldoon has always cultivated rhymes and chimes, prosody and patterns, as an ineluctable feature of poetic language, and as a stone to trouble the living stream of contemporary poetry. Although Muldoon frequently asserts that most metrics and forms of prosody are specific to language and not unique to poetics, many of his creative solutions stretch the boundaries of ordinary lingual flow and audibility. This time the verses gleam with such chimes as 'Desertmartin – oddly heartened' (4), 'goose-downed truckle – honeysuckle' (14), 'Magwitch – package' (21), 'Portrush – partridge' (23), 'jump jet – trumpet' (26), 'utter tosh – out of Bosch' (27), 'little to do – military coup' (64), 'Onassis – nauseous' (75), 'Ben Hourihane – set off a chain,' 'tumble-de-drum – titanium' (100), 'shelter us – glamour-puss' (102), 'load of balderdash – oversee a cache' (107), 'Ford Cortina – Roman quadriga' (110). Language, like knowledge, can also be confusing: 'Did I say "calamine"? / I meant "chamomile"' (5). The answer is no; the volume has so far not mentioned anything closer to calamine and chamomile than 'sandstone limen' and 'mustard' (4), if these or other similar auditory, olfactory, gustatory, sensible,

linguistic or nonsensible connections might be made with what has previously been mentioned. This confusion, nevertheless, is apposite in its signalling of the emotional distress and cognitive dissonance in Muldoon's elegy for Heaney. This multivalent confusion continues in 'Some Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them,' dedicated to Muldoon's son Asher: 'Bear in mind that "calomel" looks a lot like "chamomile" / to the guy trying to compile a camping check list' (69). The alliteration of Cs in these two and many other poems seems as semantically sensible as the confusions of calamine, chamomile and calomel appear logically applicable. They combine in the two poems for Heaney and Asher the 'polycentric pedigree' that runs in Muldoon's poetry from the dedication in *New Weather* 'for my Fathers and Mothers.'[40] The sorrows of Heaney's death, Muldoon's patron, mentor and patrilineal father figure, and the responsibilities of parenthood for his son, belong to the invaluable qualities of life – the relations and responsibilities for which language is not always yet given, and for which there are no easy remedies. Such sounds, such repetitions of sounds, as well as the deployment of just the right word, coalesce in the calibrations of ICT, knowledge and language in 'Recalculating,' a poem in which these strategies serve to open up both knowledge and language.

'Source is to leak as Ireland is to debt' (45). The central sentence in 'Recalculating' has all the power of a proverb. Muldoon's revised sonnet captures with grim irony the recurrent credit crisis that has troubled the Irish economy since the Celtic Tiger. His trick of reversing vehicles in his metaphor and of modulating its timbre yields a confused, almost reversed, situation: Ireland comes second to finance. Debt is no longer a function of the GNP or any particular budget; on the contrary, the GNP and every budget are now functions of Debt. Linguistic catachresis presents the cognitive chiasmus of volatile times. In its use of terminology of source and leak, the central line also hints at the recalibration of political rhetoric in the wake of WikiLeaks. Fourteen similar sounding statements reflect a number of crucial and coincidental issues of our day, some of which are reverted in the second stanza. The linking of lines by starting every new sentence with the final word of the preceding one, infuses an uncanny feeling that somehow these issues connect, like lines in a stanza and stanzas in a sonnet. The title word itself sounds like an admonishing key word to any agile mind, and to backward-looking conservatives and progressive radicals alike. The very appropriate title suggests a view of mathematics and the economy as transitive and in the process change, while it also evokes a computation of technological and digital types, and a renovation of literary metaphors and

40 Muldoon, *New Weather*, epigraph.

a review of language usage. Such a process of vigilant reconsideration is ongoing, as the present continuous tense makes clear: 'Recalculat*ing*.' Furthermore, the title also resonates with current idioms. A GPS normally says 'recalculating' if the driver misses a turn, before calculating a new possible route, but most drivers know they are better off trusting their own judgement in local terrain. In its recalculating, this poem also turns towards Muldoon's own poetry. In its authoritative sentences, present tense and current concerns, 'Recalculating' tends to respond to the previous likeable lilt, past tense and similar affairs in 'The Old Country' (*HL*, 38–46). As a reversion of standard figures of speech and thought, these verses bear resemblance to 'Famous First Words' (MSG), they pipe down and broaden the curt corrections of 'Errata' (*H*) and their catachrestic tendencies hark back to 'Symposium' (*H*). Appositely, 'Recalculating' associates itself with his other language poems, such as 'Rune' (*H*) and 'Riddle' (*HL*), through alliteration. 'Earth is to all you know as done is to dusted,' concludes the final line in a memorable *memento mori* of mixed idioms. All aims, calculations, knowledge and language will be reset before the ultimate measurement of life. Possibly instigated by a techno-digital device, the GPS, as much as by the credit crunch and associated financial issues, 'Recalculating' draws upon very general knowledge but very specific language details to create a poem that gives words, lines, catachresis and chiasmus to a compendium of the serious, the jocular and the mortal matters of our day and time.

Will the possibilities of technological revolution in communication and information ever be able to comprehend and convey the same anger, anguish, agony, joy and festivity as poetry? Has poetry changed and will it change in the era of ICT? Like a GPS in orientation, online social media, databases, websites, blogs and the profusion of digital devices have undoubtedly altered our ways of coping with disease and death, and with birth and marriage, and the way we celebrate happy occasions. The new social media have already provided entirely new and different platforms, systems and languages for articulating human thoughts and emotions. To some extent the medium is the message; ICT formats its contents. What originally organised our knowledge, ICT, has, as Fredric Jameson argues, become the historical model for the cognition and language of our time.[41] Google and online dictionaries and encyclopaedias have also facilitated the interpretation of Muldoon's poetry. Undoubtedly, Muldoon is aware of this tendency. A matrix of the almost inescapable daily presence of digital media is at work in the volume. 'Recalculating,' 'Required Fields,' 'At the Lab' and 'Seven Selfies from the Château d'If' connect to the volume's title within this matrix. Many terms and phrases reveal similar combinations: '300

41 Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*.

kHz' (5), 'prototype' (6, 87), 'capacity' (22), 'loop' (23, 48), 'scan' (30), 'barcode' (32), 'lab' and 'analyse' (37), 'screen' (56), 'sync' and 'overdub' (65), 'cell' (78), 'battery' (82), 'filed' (86), 'disc' (88) and 'wickiup' (117) are some of the words that connect to the ICT matrix, independently of the context in which they might appear. Loops of letters, repetitions of words, the cut and paste of phrases across poems, high-wire associations and instances of numerological significance are other digits and techniques that reset the ICT matrix in the volume time and again. As always, facts, information, lexicon and language appeal to encyclopaedias and dictionaries, preferably digital ones. 'Dirty Data,' the final poem, appears as a mini-matrix in itself.

Much of Muldoon's knowledge and language in the entire volume as much as in 'Dirty Data,' nevertheless, comes from sources that have not been engulfed by new media. The reference in the volume's title to Pearson's and Fowler Jr.'s *Worth Knowing*-books, 'hidden books' of which online searches yield very little, is one example. Muldoon's p@stmodernist 'Dirty Data' also more than indicates his awareness of the impact of ICT on knowledge, poetry and language. Although substantial amounts of knowledge and language in this poem are searchable, their combination, aporetics and confusions defy the basic structures and amenities of ICT. Muldoon's alterrative here, a surrealist and violent constellation of the incongruous and the surprising, can be read as a Muldoonesque *modus operandi*, a demonstration of a large number of artistic qualities that illustrate with wit and humour typical human qualities that computers still fall short of: imagination, fantasy, paralogic, aporia, connotations, alterratives and narrathanotographies, the serendipity of mishaps and misreadings, the hermeneutic possibilities of homonyms, the possibility of deconstructing their own binary logic. This does not necessarily imply that the poem is plain sailing for a human mind either, although we have the capacity for processing such contradictory, divergent and perplexing data, particularly after such cornucopias of the complicated and the contrapuntal as 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' 'Yarrow' and 'Madoc.' 'Dirty Data' offers, among many other creative innovations, the convoluted storylines of the American general, politician and author Lewis 'Lew' Wallace and his famous novel *Ben Hur* – both the book and the film – as well as the fate of the book's Irish translator, Seosamh Mac Grianna, and copious material from the Northern Irish troubles together with the natural imagery of nesting birds and dancing dolphins. The juxtaposition of the plot in *Ben Hur* with the American and Northern Irish Civil War, and with the events in the lives of Wallace and Mac Grianna, provides a triangular template for ethical considerations of empire and region, of social order and personal belief, and of a revenge plot turned into stories of forgiveness and redemption. These linguistic phenomena, literary

techniques and profound human concerns in Muldoon's alterrative appear alien to ICT. They cannot be defined as data, whether dirty or clean.

Dirty data is 'inaccurate, incomplete or erroneous data, especially in a computer system or database,' Wikipedia informs us.[42] Most aspects of Muldoon's poem do not comply with this definition. Its ethical issues do not belong in a database, its aesthetic dimension defies computer systems, its facts are mainly accurate and its language adheres to non-referential logic. For all its alternatives to ICT, the poem is, nevertheless, as the title confirms so unequivocally, full of dirty data. 'Dirty Data' captures the sense of construed facts, misinformation, collusion and collaboration in the novel *Ben Hur* and the life of Lew Wallace, in the intelligence and counter-intelligence in civil wars and Northern Ireland and, undoubtedly, in the contemporary wars and the media battles of authorities. WikiLeaks, Snowden, Fox News and Trump are obvious key words. Furthermore, dirty data chimes with dirty wars. Wikipedia explains further on dirty data: 'Unclean data can contain such mistakes as spelling or punctuation errors, incorrect data associated with a field, incomplete or outdated data, or even data that has been duplicated in the database. It can be cleaned through a process known as data cleansing.'[43] Most likely, there are no spelling mistakes or punctuation errors in Muldoon's 'Dirty Data.' Many instances *appear* to be mistaken and erroneous, apart from the fact that they are very unlikely to be mistakes and errors in Muldoon's meticulous and insanely-conceived alterratives. 'Ben Hourihane / falls fuel of the new Roman turbine' (100), for example, which Fran Brearton gives as a typical misphrasing in her review of the book, splices Ben Hur's conflict with Messala to an Irish namesake's incendiary combat against another imperial power.[44] The deliberate exchange of turbine for tribune also connects with the later 'Mescalero girl who refers to moral // turpitude as moral *turpentine*' (117). Ignorance, complaisance and carelessness in matters of human rights and social injustice make a combustible cocktail in communities that suffer from lack of moral commitment and parity of esteem. Similarly, 'such is the integrity of their kraal' (101), regarded as a misquotation from Churchill, hints at the English prime minister's involvement in defending the British empire as officer and reporter, particularly his experiences during the Boer War. Other deliberate (mis) phrasings occur too, such as 'Little Miss

42 AA, 'Dirty Data,' in *Wikipedia* (2017), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_data, accessed 17 April 2019.

43 Ibid.

44 Fran Brearton, 'Review of *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Guardian*, 6 February 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/06/one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-paul-muldoon-review-seamus-heaney, accessed 17 April 2019.

Messala' (102), a humorous effeminisation and diminution of the Roman tribune. 'It looks as if Little Miss Messala, played by a Belfast boy, will clutch / at the idea he might drive a tea-chest bass / to victory' (102), opens up the terrain for more Muldoonisms. Yes, Stephen Boyd from Belfast starred as Messala in William Wyler's film from 1959, that's a fact, and he has ideas of winning the chariot race at Colosseum, both in the film and the book. But 'tea-chest bass?' This jolt is a specimen piece of a surrealist leap. Probably a visualisation of horse and chariot, 'tea-chest bass' also rhymes in Muldoonian fashion with database. The fanciful image of Messala on a tea-chest bass is iconic of how ill-fitting ICT sometimes appears from the perspective of the humanities. These leaps of language and fantasy could go further. A combination of 'tea chest' and 'Lew' as a search string in Google or You Tube returns a hilarious video on skiffle music by Lew Dite, resplendent with tradition, word play, dead pan humour, narrative abruption, historical baggage and political implications à la Muldoon.[45] Has Lew Dite done this deliberately or is his video a result of coincidence and circumstance? Facts and information are scant, and the hermeneutic possibilities abound. Is Muldoon aware of Lew Dite's video? Perhaps, perhaps not. Lew Dite's You Tube video certainly plays up a Muldoonian spirit, and illustrates some of the intertextual serendipity that can ensue from Muldoon's search-spurring alterratives. Duplications abound too in Muldoon's poem. 'To add to the confusion' appears many times, as does the inter-authorial bonhomie above facts and rationality: 'That's right, Lew.' However, these examples would only be considered dirty within an ICT rationale. Within language and the arts, Muldoon's poetry in particular, these examples of linguistic play, rhymes and chimes, repetitions and refrains, fanciful phrases and imaginative leaps, offer other means of thinking beyond linguistic referentiality, historical chronology, narrative linearity, mathematical computation, applied logic and binary constructions upon which much of ICT is predicated. The poem ends with a wickiup call:

> In your chest safe is the very handkerchief a nonplussed
> Father Daly waved as a flag of truce on Bloody Sunday. When
>   Pilate lets that hanky fall
>
> it swerves as a morning to those who continue to wine and dine
> on Massic and edible dormice, not to speak of the Seven Sleepers
>   of Ephesus,
> for whom this is indeed a wickiup call. (117)

45 Lew Dite, 'Sporting Life (Tea Chest Bass),' (2008), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUs4xxhoQKs, accessed 17 April 2019.

Bloody Sunday in 1972, the story of Christ (and *Ben Hur*) and the classical myth of the seven companions in the cave who hibernated for 300 years to escape religious persecution – three significant historical, religious and literary events of the Western world – meet in these final lines. Yet, the final 'wickiup call' seems to be the pivotal point. The call is ambivalent beyond recalculations and dirty data. What could certainly be a Muldoonist crossing of wake up and wiki up is also a synonym for wigwam, wickiup. So, the wake-up call could be issued to ICT enthusiasts and people in general who are unaware of the deficiencies of ICT to comprehend the metaphysical dimension and spiritual matters, and to reflect human trauma and indigenous wisdom, as well as alternative means of understanding and communication. Conversely, the admonition could be posted to all sorts of humanist knowledge and language communities that are still using outdated traditional methods and vocabulary, and still largely uninformed by the dawning possibilities of ICT. The simultaneous entertainment of these two interpretations, and the possibilities of several others, pit imaginative speculation and linguistic multivalence against strictures of binarism and technological instrumentalism. Muldoon's alterrative 'Dirty Data' works, in language and knowledge, as an instance of Derridean grammatology, 'the discreet, dispersed, almost imperceptible signs of liberation,' and as a breach in Jameson's prison house of language and model of contemporary thought.[46] Poetry would be in danger of disappearing if it were ever submitted to the ICT logic of dirty data, and submitted for cleaning 'through a process known as data cleansing.'[47]

Mourning might be one of the human emotions in which poetry reveals best its power. Muldoon's poetic language excels in capturing death, mourning and despair in written words, as his many narrathanatographies demonstrate so forcefully. Intense intertextuality and recondite reference, of course, also characterise his artistic idiom. Muldoon mourns Heaney throughout *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing.* The beginning of 'Dirty Data' alerts the reader yet again to Heaney's presence in the volume. 'The bog is fenced up there on Slieve Guillion, Slieve Guillion where the bracken leaf / still lies behind the Celto-Iberian sword design adopted by the Romans' (99). This first line references Heaney's bog and Viking poems, his attention to natural splendour, his poetic terrain of Northern Irish borderland geography, and his inspiration from Roman historians such as Tacitus and Pliny. Many other poems, for all their interpretational possibilities, relate to Heaney's oeuvre. 'Pelt' exudes some of the rawness of Heaney's initiation into the darker sides of nature in his early

46 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4; Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*.

47 AA, 'Dirty Data,' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_data.

poetry and 'Anonymous: From "Marban and Guaire"' shares its spirit with Heaney's chthonic element and consistent gravitation towards Irish mythology. 'Honey' is a veiled anthem to Heaney, who also refers to himself with disarming irony as 'Mr Honey' in his own bee-inspired Virgil-poem 'Glanmore Eclogue' in *Electric Light*. Furthermore, the two stanzas in Muldoon's sonnet convey both Heaney's portrayal of murder atrocities, most prominent in *North*, and his more saccharine and bucolic side, perhaps most prominent in *Field Work*. Translations, ekphrastic poems and a continuous backdrop of conflict and peace in Northern Ireland also connect this volume with Heaney's poetry, as do, of course, the mastery of literary styles and poetic language. Their sodality precedes the publication of Muldoon's first book of poetry. Muldoon changed the title of his 1973 debut volume from *The Electric Orchard* to *New Weather* in response to Heaney's *Wintering Out* of the year before on the advice of Charles Monteith, the Faber and Faber editor to whom Heaney had recommended him.[48] Heaney reciprocated with *Electric Light* in 2001. Seamus Heaney's spirit reigns in this volume too, an honorary and natural gesture by Muldoon. Muldoon and Heaney's imaginative interactions and personal relations have inspired both poets from Muldoon's earliest poems, via his funeral eulogy and his bearing of the pall, to his commemoration in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*.[49] A clause in the first line of 'Dirty Data,' 'the Celto-Iberian sword design / adopted by the Romans' (99), refers the reader to 'Cuthbert and the Otters,' Muldoon's elegy for Heaney at the very beginning of the volume, in which the sword holds a central place with the cryptic inscription 'SINIMIAINIAIS' (7).

'The book places the late laureate [Heaney] within history and contemporary culture,' Fiona Sampson writes of *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*.[50] She also points to 'Cuthbert and the Otters' as the preeminent poem in the volume. A large number of reasons support her choice. Muldoon's elegy for Heaney, the treasured poet to whom the Nobel committee awarded the prize in 1995 'for his works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past,' sustains some of the great loss the Nobel laureate's

48 Adam Crothers, 'Paul Muldoon at Faber and Faber,' *The Literateur* (2016), http://literateur.com/paul-muldoon-at-faber-faber-19-september-2016/, accessed 5 April 2019.

49 For more detailed explications of interpoeticality between Muldoon and Heaney, see footnote 7 on page 167.

50 Fiona Sampson, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Independent*, 26 January 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/one-thousand-things-worth-knowing-by-paul-muldoon-book-review-sombre-lines-of-beauty-from-a-supreme-10003797.html, accessed 17 April 2019.

death brought to Ireland and the world, way beyond literary circles.'[51] 'To me, he [Heaney] was like Lady Gaga or Mick Jagger or Jesus,' Professor of Law Yxta Maya Murray wrote.[52] U2 front man Bono described Heaney as 'a great, great poet' who 'changed my life.'[53] The Irish president Michael D. Higgins paid tribute to a man whose 'contribution to the republics of letters, conscience, and humanity was immense.'[54] Former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, declared: 'Both his stunning work and his life were a gift to the world. His mind, heart, and his uniquely Irish gift for language made him our finest poet of the rhythms of ordinary lives and a powerful voice for peace … His wonderful work, like that of his fellow Irish Nobel Prize winners Shaw, Yeats, and Beckett, will be a lasting gift for all the world.'[55] Ciaran Carson, companion, poet and for many years the director at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University, Belfast, averred that 'there is no poet in Ireland who has not been influenced by his example, and is in his debt; but so is everyone who has been touched by his poetry, and they are innumerable.' Fellow writer from Northern Ireland, Patricia Craig, stated that Heaney 'was probably the best-known poet in the world.'[56] Numerous other people from all walks of life paid tribute to Heaney. Some of the impact of Heaney's writing after his death can be studied in, *Hearing Heaney*, the lecture series at St. Patrick's College at the Dublin City University published in six volumes by Four Courts Press, the two issues of volume eight of *Irish Pages* entitled 'Heaney' and 'After Heaney,' and special issue 49–50 of *The Irish Review*. Muldoon contributes to the public commemoration by focusing on Heaney's personality and family life in his heartfelt, humorous and alliterative eulogy at the funeral, 'Seamus Heaney's Beauty.'[57] In his obituary, 'The Mark of a Great Poet,' he writes of Heaney's poetry:

51 Nobelprize.org, 'The Nobel Prize in Literature,' (Stockholm: Nobelprize.org, 1995), https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/, accessed 17 April 2019.

52 Yxta Maya Murray, 'Punishment and the Costs of Knowledge,' in *Hearing Heaney*, ed. Eugene McNulty and Ciaran Mac Murchaidh (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 136.

53 Paul David Hewson, 'President and Taoiseach Lead Tributes to the Late Seamus Heaney,' *Independent.ie*, 30 August 2013, http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/president-and-taoiseach-lead-tributes-to-the-late-seamus-heaney-29539156.html, accessed 17 April 2019.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ciaran Carson, 'Tributes to Seamus Heaney,' BBC, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-23899646; Patricia Craig, 'Seamus Heaney Obituary: Nobel Prize-Winning Irish Poet,' *The Belfast Telegraph*, 31 August 2013, http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-seamus-heaney-nobel-prizewinning-irish-poet-29541684.html, accessed 17 April 2019.

57 Paul Muldoon, 'Seamus Heaney's Beauty,' *The New Yorker*, 1 September 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/seamus-heaneys-beauty, accessed 17 April 2019.

> The truth is that he developed into a much more complex poet than anyone might have imagined, one who was increasingly recognized as having insights into not only plows, horses, and frogs, but international politics, human rights, and the attack on the World Trade Center. He was the only poet I can think of who was recognized worldwide as having moral as well as literary authority and, as such, may be the last major poet to even entertain such a possibility.[58]

Heaney's death hit large parts of the world and all of the island of Ireland: 'You must be devastated,' the customs officer said to Muldoon when he arrived in Ireland from the US for the funeral.[59]

It is some of this devastation that Muldoon forges into language, learning and lamentation in 'Cuthbert and the Otters,' his elegy for Heaney (13 April 1939 – 30 August 2013). Heaney's exceptional position in life, literature and language provides a primary reason for regarding 'Cuthbert and the Otters' as the preeminent poem in *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, as Fiona Simpson does.[60] Muldoon also gives priority to this particular poem by placing it first in the volume. A further reason is how Muldoon's elegy distinguishes itself considerably in composition and confusion from all the other condolences and obituaries that have been written, and from his own alliterative and honorary eulogy at the funeral in Dublin on 2 September 2013. The most important reason for the poem's importance is, of course, the quality of the poem and its commemorative powers. For all the superficial and misunderstood criticism of Muldoon's ingenuities of language and his associative shape-changing technique, his elegies have been received with close to universal acclaim, even though many of them reach a pinnacle in the linguistic consciousness and alternative logic for which his poetry has been deplored in some quarters. Muldoon's many narrathanotographies for his undead and deceased father, for Mary Farl Powers, for his mother and sister and Warren Zevon, and this time for Seamus Heaney, have always contributed to the life of his biological and cultural relatives by commemorating them in seering language, form and imagination. These laments also abound with the daring allusiveness and cryptic

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58 Paul Muldoon, 'The Mark of a Great Poet,' *Daily Beast*, 30 August 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/30/paul-muldoon-on-seamus-heaney-the-mark-of-a-great-poet, accessed 5 April 2019.

59 Helen Vendler, 'Second Thoughts & Coda,' *Irish Pages* 8, no. 2 (2014), 19.

60 Sampson, '*One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* by Paul Muldoon.'

knowledge that work in productive tension with the forebodings and grief they also express. Death, loss and mourning all have to do with 'unknowing,' the lesser known, the '"spiritual" experiences' and the 'something one doesn't quite understand' that Muldoon considers 'another article of faith'– some of the aspects of the human condition that might be better apprehended when entered 'in the spirit of the unknowing.' 'Only in a spirit of humility, is there half a chance that one will come out the other side *knowing* anything at all in some minor way.'[61] This spirit of unknowing is also immanent in Muldoon's attitude to language; his awe, faithfulness and humility 'before the power and possibility of language,' the paradox that the self or ego must give way to a complete openness and humility before the language.[62]

In his narrathanotography for Heaney, 'Cuthbert and the Otters,' Muldoon approaches, very appropriately, the poetry and legacy of his patron and fellow poet in the same spirit of awe and humility. The title's reference to St. Cuthbert works as a poetic beatification of Heaney, and places him in a spiritual realm of sanctity and longevity. This type of poetic apotheosis also reflects Heaney's reverence for the religious dimension that characterises large parts of his poetry, of which 'Lightenings viii' also known as 'The Monks of Clonmacnoise,' one of the three Heaney poems given on the Nobel website, might be a specimen. The reference in Muldoon's title to the mythical story of the otters paying homage to the saint, recorded in the Venerable Bede's hagiography, points to the aspect of Heaney's poetry that draws upon the wonders of nature, 'The Otter' most of all. 'Mountbatten of Burma. Montgomery of Alamein' (12): Heaney belongs to the premier league of statesmen in times of war. Muldoon's language is in the same league. Vocabulary, phrase and idiom relive Heaney's poetry as much as they extend the vitality of Muldoon's language. 'Shoulder of salmon,' 'little darne,' 'sandstone limen' and 'linden flitch' (3) are some of the words that resound with what Hobsbawn termed 'Heaneyspeak.' 'Danes,' 'Bog,' 'berserkers' (3, 4, 5,) and numerous other phrases are strongly resonant of the bog poems and the Viking culture of *North* in particular. '82nd Airborne,' Lucky Strikes' and 'G.I.' (10) echo Heaney's poems on World War II. 'Like the oracle at Delphi' (5) reverberates with his reverence for classical heritage. 'Orange,' 'Greenwich' and 'red' (6, 7) hint at the (political) colour consciousness in much of his verse. 'Refulgent all. From *fulgere,* "to flash"' (12). The last words in Muldoon's elegy evoke *Electric Light* and the Nobel Laureate's linguistic radiance

61 Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon.'

62 Keller, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 27; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 137; Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' 78.

and wit. Furthermore, the range of languages and dialects in Muldoon's poem, from Irish and Latin to local and demotic idioms, pays homage to Heaney's and his own shared Hiberno-English legacy, their capacity for *le mot juste* and their life-long interpoetic sodality of imagination. The connection between Muldoon and Heaney's poetry runs like 'the tunnel from Spital Tongues to the staithes' (4).

Muldoon's elegy for Heaney draws on the Nobel Laureate's imaginative realm and incandescent language, but these verses also present some of Muldoon's own linguistic effulgence and encyclopaedic eccentricity. '*Diseart*,' 'staithes,' '*frenum*,' 'sarabande,' 'smolt' and 'skald' (4, 5, 6, 9, 10) are some of the words that might make readers stumble and look for an advanced dictionary. 'SINIMIANIAIS' (7), the inscription on a Viking sword, a mystery equivalent to 'CROATAN' in *Madoc*, leaves the reader at a loss beyond Google and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. How do you make sense of and put into words the loss of a close friend and a public figure who is also a prominent poet? The search for words and meanings, and the sense that all responses are inadequate, reflect some of the shock, incomprehension and inarticulacy in the wake of death and bereavement. 'Did I say "calamine?" / I meant "chamomile"' (85). Confusion is rife and remedies do not exist amid the sorrow and grief. Alliterative strings, not least of 'calamine,' 'chamomile,' 'Cuthbert' and Cs, often appear as a secular and maniacal rosary to stave off the thoughts of death and grief: 'Cuthbert whose chalice cloth / will be carried,' 'when it comes to the crunch,' 'an otter cortege / passing under a colonnade' (8, 11). Facts are many and many of them appear disconnected: 'The wax moth lives in a beehive proper. It can detect sound frequencies up to 300 kHz' (5). Concentration on facts and knowledge also appears as a means to exclude emotional distress. Though not to much avail. 'I am at once full of dread / and in complete denial. / I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead' (4). The direct statement flashes like lightening in the third stanza to dissolve all psychological defense mechanisms. Death and dread hit the speaker. This fact is inexorable and incommensurate with all other things. The alliterative monosyllabic rhyme sounds as solid and painful as the clanking of nails into palm or coffin. 'Thole' rings with the power of *Beowulf*, and of Heaney's translation of the old alliterative epic.[63] 'I cannot

63 In an empirical quest for the roots and use of the word 'thole,' similar to Stephen's for 'tundish' in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Heaney writes in his vindication of the Anglo-Saxon epic: 'What I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with *thole* on its multicultural odyssey was the feeling that Osip Mandelstam once defined as a 'nostalgia for world culture.' And this was a nostalgia I didn't even know I suffered until I experienced its fulfilment in this little epiphany. It was as if, on the analogy of baptism by desire, I had undergone something like an illumination by philology. And even though I did not know

thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead' (11). Muldoon's sentence is repeated twice. Its alien ancient word, its simplicity and repetition and sheer desperation, forms a refulgent refrain for the commemoration of Seamus Heaney.

Fittingly, Muldoon makes use of his own type of rhyme royal for his elegy in order to underline Heaney's noble status, and to link Heaney's and his own innovative contributions to form and their canonical status. Muldoon's seven line stanzas of enjambment and freer metre and rhyme add life to the subject matter, Heaney, as they do to the inheritance of Chaucer and Amergin. Muldoon's elegy amounts to 27 stanzas, a number based upon the strength of Celtic culture: 'In the way that 9 and 3 are a perfect match / an Irish war band has 27 members' (4). Furthermore: 'The chiastic structure of the book of Daniel mimics a double ax-head' (11), as does Muldoon's rhyme pattern in the poem. Although many of the stanzas keep their own chimes, the major rhyme scheme observes a chiastic pattern: end words in stanza one rhyme with end words in stanza 27, stanza two with 26, etc., until they meet in stanza 14; the stanza that contains the mystic 'SINIMIAINIAIS' sword inscription and its accompanying sentence: 'As for actually learning to grieve, / it seems a nonstarter' (7). The chiastic battle-axe form provides edge, firmness and compositional structure to the welter of contrary emotions in commemorating the life and legacy of Seamus Heaney.

'Cuthbert and the Otters' is placed as the most significant poem in the volume. In subject matter, knowledge and language, Muldoon's narrathanography revivifies Heaney's contribution to the human condition and records his literary powers and moral authority in a manner that takes its inspiration from Heaney. The shriek of desperation at the inadequacies of apt response and the difficulties of finding alinguistic scaffolding that might convey such extremities of emotion is an expression of understandable anger, anguish and agony: 'I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead.'

One Thousand Things Worth Knowing brings to the current scene of poetry in 2015 a volume brimful with knowledge, and vibrant with a language that never rests in its own referentiality. Adlinguistic adversity and lingual machinations splice reference to events, to knowledge, to sorrow and joyfulness, with bewildering artifice, literary recursions and fanciful flights to uncertain destinations. The volume belongs to Muldoon's p@stmodernist tendency and its sceptical inquiry into what knowledge is and might be, into how knowledge is distributed and into how some forms of distribution also configure the content that it distributes all align themselves with the wider themes of technocratic

at the time, I had by then reached the point where I was ready to translate *Beowulf*.' *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), xxv–xxvi.

late modernity; this is the basis for the volume's simultaneous celebration of facts, fiction and language. How the knowable and unknowable relate to each other is a constant theme in a volume that also explores types of language that might articulate the gradations between the two, and the realm of the unknown. To what extent mourning can ever become part of knowledge, comprehension or wisdom, is an open question with which Muldoon grapples with emotional distress, cognitive dissonance and linguistic alacrity in his memorable elegy for Heaney, and in the constant awareness of their shared passion for knowledge, literature and language. The work of both poets attempts to 'overcome all technical and epistemological obstacles,' in Derrida's words.[64] Muldoon's writings, in all their adlinguistic glides, astounding alterratives and disruptive narrathanographies, also challenge 'the theological and metaphysical impediments' that have so solidly confined the writing and thinking of the Western world.[65] His writing presents a type that has consistently established itself in the contemporary canon because of its tendency to breach, to quoof, to confound the literary terminology with which his poetry might be defined. More than representing the established, the empirical and the recognisable, Muldoon's poetry endeavours indefatigably to present the forgotten and mislaid, the unknown and unknowable, and the confounded and disconcerting, in a language that constantly runs the risk of rational confusion and communicative collapse. The achievement of Muldoon's poetry is predicated upon incessant inquiry into the inconstant, mutable and capricious phenomena of language, and the dark reality and alienating aspects of existence with which they interact. *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* extends that achievement in important ways.

64 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4.
65 Ibid.

Conclusion

'Quaat?' asks Derek Mahon of Muldoon's poetry and language in 1983.[1] 'Muldoon makes us think about language in all its senses,' Edna Longley states in 2003.[2] 'The weirdness of his linguistic adventure cannot be overstated,' corroborates John McAuliffe in 2015.[3] Both Longley and McAuliffe – probably Mahon too despite his critical query – have always understood and engaged with the preternatural language of Paul Muldoon's poetry. They articulate precisely the critical position that now, after Muldoon's twelve volumes and forty-five years of publication, tends to establish itself in the reception of his poetry. Jefferson Holdridge, also always very sensitive to Muldoon's language, states: 'There is no denying Muldoon's admirable ability to look into the abyss (within as well as outside him) and to survive the experience.'[4] He explains cogently many of the human concerns that Muldoon's poetry confronts, and the importance of his poetry. Despite their astuteness and comprehension, none of these scholars, nor any others, attend at substantial length to Muldoon's language. Longley's reviews and articles and Jonathan Allison and Peter Denman's essays suggested a critical dimension that has remained unexplored up to this point. After Kendall, Wills and Holdridge's books and the essays collections by Kennedy-Andrews and Kendall and McDonald, specific and new studies of Muldoon's poetry will enhance the critical debate and the hermeneutic dimension of his poetry. Anne Karhio's *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Space* offers one such critical insight. This book, *The Language of Paul Muldoon's Poetry*, provides another approach to Muldoon' writing.[5]

Muldoon's 'linguistic adventure' and 'admirable ability to look into the abyss' characterise both his language-adventurous verses – for example 'The Point,' 'Rune,' 'The Plot,' 'Crossing the Line,' 'Errata,' 'Madoc,' 'Famous First Words,' 'The Grand Conversation,' 'A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning,' 'Milkweed and Monarch,' 'From the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' 'Hard Drive,' 'Dirty Data,' '@,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' Cuthbert and the Otters,' 'Maggot' and 'Wayside Shrines' – and his narrathanotographic verses, e.g.

1 Mahon, 'Quaat?' 27–28.
2 Longley, 'Twists and Turns: Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel*,' 65.
3 McAuliffe, 'Paul Muldoon: One Thousand Things Worth Knowing.'
4 Jefferson Holdridge, 'Festering Ideas: Paul Muldoon's *Maggot*,' *The Irish Studies Review* 19, no. 3 (2011), 346. See also *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon*.
5 Karhio, *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Place*.

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'Hedgehog,' 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi,' 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' 'Madoc,' 'The Bangle (Slight Return),' 'Incantata,' 'Yarrow,' 'Milkweed and Monarch,' 'Now, Now,' 'Aftermath,' 'Turkey Buzzards,' 'Sillyhow Stride: *In Memory of Warren Zevon,*' 'Maggot,' 'Wayside Shrines' and 'Cuthbert and the Otters.' Frequently, perhaps always, the Derridean experimental raids on the linguistic and the astonishing Adornian insights into the horrible coalesce. Muldoon's alphaphiliac, linguipotent and audiofetishistic language – his avidity for finding the precise letter, sign or word, whether they already exist or not; for the mining of the single letter and language phenomenon; for finding the next chime; for the dissemination of sound and sense across volumes; for the explorations of turning the line and continuing with a difference old, obscure, new and novel forms of poetry; for the perpetual imagination of new metaphors, analogues and tangents, of which many are frequently taken from the semiotic seas of language itself; for the hermeneutic expansion of the sentence way beyond syntax; for meta-linguistic perspicuity and speculation; for parapostmodernist poetics; and for incessant immersion into language – offers unique insights into the abyss and the survivability of our radically darkened and frequently alienated human condition. His narrathanotographies question, howl and laugh at illimitable death, disease and sorrow. His vitalogues, for example 'The Sonogram,' The Footling,' and 'The Birth', celebrate, enjoy and wonder over birth, life, felicity. Many less categorisable verses engage with situations when these extremes of death and life are confused, muddled and confounded. Muldoon's many subjective correlatives, for example mules, Paris, Armageddon, Immram, Madoc and Maggot, intensify appropriate compassion and confusion. His alterratives, such as 'The Electric Orchard,' 'Whim,' 'October 1950,' 'Ireland,' 'Immram,' 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' 'Gathering Mushrooms,' 'Trance,' 'Madoc,' 'The Plot,' 'Errata,' 'Plan B,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'Yup,' and 'Dirty Data' engage with the aesthetic, cognitive and philosophical concerns of life. His italicette – *'Just throw him a cake of Sunlight Soap, let him wash himself ashore'* – and sonnetics conduct a prolonged immersion with the sonnet for multiple reasons. Muldoon' poetry, in such poems as 'Quoof,' 'Madoc,' 'Incantata,' 'Crossing the Line,' 'The Plot,' 'Errata,' 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' '@,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'Dirty Data' and 'Cuthbert and the Otters' evince an unswerving allegiance to alphabetic curiosity, lexical scrutiny, syntactic amplitude, grammatical intricacies, linguistic phenomena, semiotic weirdness, meta-theoretical language discourses and to translations at large, to all of the specific lingual features that mark so characteristically almost each and all of his poems. One very significant reason for Muldoon's many remarkable verses, voices and visions is the language of his poetry.

A type of poetry that enacts conspicuously its own language attains a distinctly discernible alienated aspect, a sense of enfolding doubleness, as much as interpretational incertitude and hermeneutic plurivocity. Muldoon's language, thus, opens up for multiplication of meanings. The purposes, points and pitfalls of the manner in which the poem has been composed demands as much hermeneutic scrutiny as the ideas, acts and events with which the poem interacts, and, thus, charges these ideas, acts and events with the originary and the hardly traceable, with the different and the deferred. This language always disrupts, dissuades and disseminates any easy route to interpretation, to conventional classification, to stable paradigms of philosophy and literature theory, or to historical conceptualisations and social formations. It is a language that de-familiarises the human condition in order to understand it better. It is a language that continually questions its own right and possibility to articulate the dialectics of rationality and the utter darkness human beings face and frequently cause. It is a type of poetry that is recurrently monstrous and restive to its own creative and critical community, generally unseen and unacknowledged in historical discourses and socio-political debate, but a type of poetry that shows signs of liberation in future from institutions of domination, dicta and dogma. Just as the protean diversity of Joyce's *Ulysses* presented an imaginative vision of mutability and plurality in reciprocity with Yeats's oeuvre at the very emergence of the Irish Free State in 1922, Muldoon's poems suggest moments of possible futures in correspondence with Heaney's poetry during the Troubles and beyond. Furthermore, Muldoon's poetry offers a nisus of emancipatory pluralities that disseminate the tensions of noetic cogency and caducous persiflage, and that suggest a semiosis to liberate terminological, theological and teleological language and cognition from their perpetuation of permanence and predeterminism. Muldoon's alphabetic aesthetics and language-focussed poetry often acquire their significance from the many deregulated discourses with which they critically interact.

Muldoon's ceaseless propensities for the pitfalls and possibilities of language originate from several impulses. Muldoon wrote his first poems in Irish, probably due to inspiration by his teachers. His predilection for writing poems instead of essays in school due to laziness, suggests individual talent and didactic wisdom. Irish and English present the impetus, literature, culture and language of the dual tradition into and beyond which Muldoon writes himself. Another trace could be his exposure to and his radical irreverence for the Latin and liturgy he met in church. How Muldoon's poetry relates to the pantheon of poets far beyond those that are already established, for example his interactions with James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Robert Frost,

Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson and the Belfast Group, indicates another impulse. Translations, between languages, forms, genres and cultures, tend to perpetuate his linguistic fervour. Nuances between English and American suggest one strand in these translations. The terror and violence he met in Northern Ireland and observes in the world – why and how do you write poetry amidst such horror? – and their many languages that weigh upon and interfere with poetry, propose another source for his language. The perennial question of giving word, form and sense to death, disease, mourning and grief might appear as a creative challenge more immediate to most people. How the emotions of life, birth, joy and felicity, not to mention fear, anxiety and confusion, can be articulated again for new generations under altering social conditions and technological development, appears as more incumbent question by each new day. Muldoon's transmutable language stems from multiple places, discourses and contexts.

Muldoon's narrathanotographies, alterratives, italicettes and subjective correlatives, as much as his alphaphilia, audiofetishism, adlinguisticism and p@stmodernism, show forth a language diversity that ceaselessly questions language as much as death and life, and the ineffable space between them. Such language intimates the spiritual, the unknowable and the metaphysical, and to explore the metaphysical as an empty signifier or to imagine the non-metaphysical and the non-being for one's own language and one's own existence, as Muldoon's poetry frequently does, suggests small moments and instances of future liberation from the many religious, ideological and historical impositions upon life and language. Such submersion in language is, as the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry makes evident, perpetually energising, and presents some beastly poems to change, possibly the past that bears upon us, but certainly also the future ahead of us.

> The title poem of *Quoof* (1983) is a sonnet that still sounds as fresh and oddly typical as ever. Its unlikely choice of subject, a family word for a hot water bottle (a "quoof"), satirises the dreamy, Esperanto idealism that we may all, one day, be able to truly understand one another.[6]

More than three decades after its publication, McAuliffe testifies to the unappeasability and potential longevity of 'Quoof,' Muldoon's monstrous little poem

6 John McAuliffe, 'Poetry: Paul Muldoon, Ireland's Enigmatic Riddler of Rhymes,' *The Irish Times*, 5 November 2016, http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/poetry-paul-muldoon-ireland-s-enigmatic-riddler-of-rhymes-1.2841227, accessed 17 April 2019.

that, like his early poem 'The Hedgehog' in *New Weather*, risked its own extinction by folding in on its own language and form under the barrage of impositions, and that was met with congeries of critical questioning and confessions of incomprehension. 'Quoof' still puzzles and prods language, interpretation and imagination. The uncanny *unheimlichheit* of Muldoon's linguistic beast slouches with all the significance of language, from childhood, adolescent sex, alienation and speculation on the human condition, to, as McAuliffe's comments hint of, its apprehension of translucent communication, linguistic idealism and universal ecumenism. Language splits, misconstrues, distances and alienates as much as it unites, constructs, centres and disarms. Muldoon's enactments of the lesser known depths of language result in poems that explore in other, in reiterative and in new ways human experiences and human conditions, the phenomena we know, or think we know, and the vast contact zones with the unknown and the unknowable. Such poems may also suggest, like 'Quoof', that other forms of human contact and communication beyond ordinary alphabetic government provide alternative ways of preserving the human, and of connecting people and conjoining communities. A language like Muldoon's certainly indicates that the fractured, the split, the heterogeneous, the plural and the different are integral to all ideas and concepts that can still largely only be conveyed by congealed vocabulary: unity, history, wholesomeness, harmony, centre, democracy. 'Quoof,' like 'Madoc,' offers a shibboleth to separate critics in manner and methods that are likely to look different from a retrospective vantage point. 'Quoof' certainly does in McAuliffe's recent evaluation. The language of Muldoon's poetry is distinct, diverse and different.

Will Muldoon's way with language disappear in the new models and formats of language and thinking in the continual unfolding of the IT-revolution? Perhaps it will, just as so many languages and language phenomena get lost by the day, just as the linguistic turn of the previous century tends to recede into the domains of language and literature. Perhaps it will not. IT-facilities produce new terminology, formats and possibilities, as much as they sustain and solidify old concepts and pitfalls. Language is generative and dynamic, it informs perpetually new poets, new writers and new artists, as well as Muldoon. However, Muldoon's weird and wonderful and highly idiosyncratic language is one potent reason why his poetry is likely to be read by and to inspire future generations too.

Is language the most significant in Muldoon's poetry? To the extent that language in his poetry might be distinguished from other aspects, it arguably is. Does language present the only value? Far from it. Perhaps his elegiac strain, his sense of birth and vitalogy or his cornucopia of the carnivalesque provide topics for future substantial research. In-depth analyses of the political

implications that Muldoon on occasions hints at have largely surpassed the critical corps, poses another field of research. What would a feminist approach to his poetry reveal? Does his many Atlantic crossings bear upon the relations between Europe and America, in a time when these two continents appear to estrange each other more than at any previous point in history? What about class and social cohesion? Or the extremely precarious situation of the individual in so many corners of the world? The popular in Muldoon's poetry, for example, suggests itself as a little explored topic. Another open field is a sustained study of all his publications beyond his poetry volumes – libretti, drama, children's books, critical essays, rock lyrics, CDs – that would enlarge the scope of research on Muldoon's writing, as would other specific and yet unimagined approaches. Entirely new topics and hermeneutics that originate from his poetry are likely to emerge. Whatever specific approaches to Muldoon's poetry future research assumes, the fact remains: language, in all its generative plurality, constitutes a protean feature for comprehending Paul Muldoon's poetry.

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