

The Alphabet According to Paul Muldoon: To Ireland, I

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Paul Muldoon. *To Ireland, I*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

To Ireland, I [sic], ventures the present Oxford Professor of Poetry, Paul Muldoon, and continues in his Clarendon Lectures many of the experimental procedures that have earned his poetry both laurels and lashes since his debut volume, *New Weather* in 1973 to his most recent volume of poetry, *Hay* from 1998. The title reveals the devotion to Irish matters that in Muldoon's poetry runs parallel with his international interests and explorations of literature, nation and subjectivity. In this ironic and irenic survey of Irish writing Joyce becomes the vital omnipresence and in the eternal recurrence of Joyce's *The Dead* we can feel the vibrations of untimely meditations and philosophy from the margins. Art only justifies itself as a linguistic phenomenon and Muldoon's Finneganesque conglomeration of Irish literature is an Erinised one *per se*. *To Ireland, I* is a creative book of critical analysis in which the performative quality contributes to scholarly novelty. In the recent processes of inventing Ireland, or presenting Ireland from the Oxford pulpit, Muldoon offers a new sense of linguistic acuity and theoretical awareness. The resistance of the semi-italicised title to the ordinary conventions of citation is an early indication of his jocular subversion that blurs the many traditional lines of literary interpretation.

The titular citation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, evokes tralatious lines of verse and violence and indicates canonical recontextualisation. The title's peripatetic and paratactic features also point to how Muldoon's crossings of geographical, historical and literary lines are frequently characterised by linguistic leaps and associative alacrity more than conventional procedures of literary analysis. 'I begin at the beginning – "like and old ballocks, can you imagine that?" – with the first poems by the first poet [Amergin] of Ireland', runs the book's first sentence, in which Muldoon disrupts his poetic point of departure with Beckettian prose by alliterative drive and dual identification brimming with self-deprecatory irony and literary lines. The initial statement also adumbrates the poet-critic's double duties of inexpressible artistic energies and public office, the artistic catch 22 of aesthetic solipsism and social commitment, as exemplified by Amergin: 'a

mandate... to speak on national issues' and 'dealing with ideas of liminality and narthecality that are central, I think, to Irish experience.' In Amergin Muldoon discerns not only the habitual paradoxes of art, but also the generative powers of writing: 'I take my title, "Wonder-birth", from what is supposedly a direct translation of Amergin's name (the 'gin' is cognate with *genus*).' Muldoon's explanation evinces his frequent serioludic confluence of multilingual streams, literary sources and alliterative intoxication. More often than not, the critical revelations of the poet who can rhyme a cat with a dog are more driven by linguistic enchantment and textual pleasure than biographical facts, social situations and historical circumstance. Lucia, Lewis and Lucy appear as entirely text-fuelled correspondences between Joyce's daughter, MacNeice and the previous Irish Oxford professor and his Narnia, an associative swirl propelled mainly by Muldoon's high-octane mind continuously running as an interpretative outboard motor at full speed. 'This double use of "Christmas" emphasises the Christian veneer of *Imram Curaig Maile Duin*, while the *Mal* in "Malins" itself brings to mind the *Mael* in Mael Duin' says Muldoon of Freddy Malins in Joyce's *The Dead* in a macaronic fashion that indicates the essays' shifting positions and mannerist 'imarrhage'. 'a stable candle' bleeds into 'stable-born Christ, "the light of the world"' and horse transforms into 'cheval-glass'. Muldoon's linguistic oceanography runs deep in his detection of an anagrammatical 'crypto-current' (one of his favourite words), of Swift in 'waft and stink'.

In his review of Muldoon's *Mules*, Muldoon's predecessor in the Oxford chair, Seamus Heaney, complains of 'the hermetic tendency', 'puzzles rather than poems' and that his 'patience with the mode [Muldoon's persistent use of metaphorical names] gets near to the breaking point.'¹ Those who sympathise with Heaney will be exasperated by Muldoon's exasperated discursions on the authors' and characters' names that are infrequently extravagant, tenuous and fanciful. He writes of the names in Joyce's *The Dead*: 'A second ghostly presence here is Alfred Nutt (1856-1910) who appears as the *nutmeg* on the table at the banquet...I am not going to try here to crack Nutt...because I know you already think I am totally nuts.' Undoubtedly, many readers agree. Nevertheless, Muldoon's namecropping revitalises with great wit the interest in the author that has long been declared dead and his textual freeplay suggests numerous new concurrences in canonical texts, Joyce's short story in particular. Above all Muldoon's explorations disclose the cryptic Gaelic layers and celebrate the Joycean wordwhorl of Irish writing. His nuts of knowledge are prolific.

The book's superimposed abecedarian order incorporates an element of the arbitrary and supplements the habitual methods of chronological order and authorial positioning in ordinary canon-building. This fascination with letters shimmers with Muldoon's persistent exploitation of the *OED* and gives shape and significance to the panorama of Irish literature. Contrarily, the alphabetic cynosure does not only define and delimit, but also indicates the importance of the single letter to Muldoon's auditory imagination and its semiotic signifiacnce in the all-encompassing processes of language. In the title, for example, the subject is phonetically and visually inscribed at the inception

of the nation, and conversely, separated as a distinctive entity in a double-spaced position inside and outside the margins of collectivity and nationality. Likewise, the apparent facility of alphabetic arbitration is counteracted by a range of connections between all the chapters that are carefully linked by coincidence, Amerginian link techniques, technical and thematic concerns, repetitions, rhyme and fanciful transgressions. The procrustean bed is also a cat's cradle.

In this intensified reading the attention to syllables and single sounds extends almost endlessly in expansive textual intricacies in which interpretation becomes retextualisation of the author's critical and creative ancestors as well as continuous cross-referencing between all parts of his essays. This vertiginous textual introspection threatens to leave the reader annoyed and dizzy, but it also instigates astonishing connections. This is seen in the exact thematic and *verbatim* concurrences Muldoon uncovers between almost all writers and Joyce's *The Dead*, although one might feel that he makes too heavy weather of the snow metaphor.

In most of the book, Muldoon treads 'the fine line between' 'allusiveness and elusiveness', 'the slip and slop of language', 'the contaygious' and 'contiguous', the public and the private, the mundane and the magic. In the only chapter marked by the absence of an author's name in the title, chapter X, biographical facts and historical dates intersect with the dissemination of writing. Similarly, the preface appears as an address to the audience of the Clarendon lectures at the end of a chapter towards the end of the book. Such multiple moves and sudden shifts are principal to Muldoon's explorations of Irish literature 'which will be devoted to the subject of veerings from, over, and back along a line, the notions of di-, trans-, and regression'. In Muldoon's textual relativism, the many lines are still traceable.

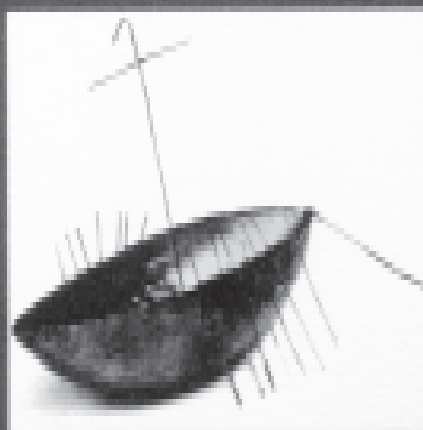
The tetradic arrangement of the book revolves with Viconian cycles and seasonal changes. 'Wonder-birth', 'Such a Local Row', 'Alone Tra La' and 'Contaygious to the Nile' are mainly literary inscriptions inviting the reader to surmise the sources. Despite the preventive abecedarium the reader is also likely to embark on the 'who's in and who's out' exercise, although, Muldoon seems to challenge the rules of this canonical game. In 'Wilde', Oscar appears as a conspicuous absence and the metamorphic Flann O'Brien can often be discerned as a Joycean palimpsest. Muldoon is absently present too: the book radiates his own equestrian élan, semi-manical Beckettian glossolalia, extraordinary narratives, extreme adlinguisticity, imaginative powers and critical force.

From the professorial position in Oxford the Irish poet in America presents to listeners and readers in a wider world his eternal recurrence to the multiplicity of Irish literature into which he writes himself. The outlandish quality of Muldoon's book is likely to be praised, punished and disciplined, but will certainly bring new and old readers, always and again, to Ireland.

Notes

- 1 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 211-3.

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