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 ‘silken 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.

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 abecedarium 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 – quooof – 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 gravity and 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 Quarterly* 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 interpoeticity 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 defamiliarising 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 Postcolonial 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 Dhomhnaill 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,

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, constitute 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

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 (Evanston: 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 Vandeveld (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 quooft, 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, quooftian, 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 ascendancy 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 'Macgillicuddy'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 pìed' 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 Voyeur”? 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

31 Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language 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 *subjective* 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).