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?’ 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. 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 alterratives, italicettes, narrathographies. 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.

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.
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 narrantographic ‘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

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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;

\(^7\) Wheatley, ‘An Irish Poet in America,’ 147.
and the way his words slip in and out of each other, marrying, transforming or dissolving, carries a constant metaphysical charge.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{To Ireland, I} and his elegies, and the importance of Joyce's language galaxy, most prominent in \textit{Finnegans Wake} of course, to his own poetic space, not least \textit{Madoc}. Yet Yeats looms as large in Muldoon's poetry as Joyce.\textsuperscript{11} Heaney and MacNeice and the Belfast Group and the whole canon of Western poetry also belong to Muldoon's

\textsuperscript{10} Mick Imlah, ‘Rhymes for Our Times,’ \textit{The Observer}, 15 November 1998, 14.

\textsuperscript{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, \textit{Irish Poetry after Joyce}, Irish Studies (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Maurice Harmon, ed. \textit{Irish Poetry after Yeats} (Dublin: Wollhound, 1979); Robert F. Garratt, \textit{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 \textit{To Ireland, I}. Muldoon's \textit{The End of the Poem} offers essays on seventeen poets from Yeats to Heaney. See also, Eric Falci, \textit{Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966–2010} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); John Goodby, \textit{Irish Poetry since 1950} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Matthews, \textit{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.\footnote{12}{Bloom, 
_The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry._}

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.’\footnote{13}{Holdridge, 
_The Poetry of Paul Muldoon_, 142.} 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 alternative ‘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.\footnote{14}{Wills, 
_Reading Paul Muldoon_, 203.} 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
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
    f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
    a l f a a l f a a l f a a l f a a l f a
    l f a l l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
    f a l f f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
    a l f a a l f a a l f a 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
    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 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 polyseman- tics in Hay. As with any other example, ‘The Plot’ illustrates the very problematic 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

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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.  

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. 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 différence, 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. 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 alphabets, 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 organi-
cist 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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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. 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.’ 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.’

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

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the end of an implicit narrative on natural beauty and love rendered in the
common language of ordinary people. Balladlic form ensures the popular ad-
dress of an elevation of the natural in the mode of Rousel'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 succeed-
ing 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 ‘tradi-
tional 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 fea-
tures. 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 Bar-
thes' 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 impercep-
tibly 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 sug-
gests an American English adlinguisticity that appears anachronistic to Ro-
mantic sensibility. The trisyllabic 'endeavours' also suggests some air of idio-
matic 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 re-
duce their immense popularity and influence on the Romantic imagination.
Sir Walter Scott's reduplication of Scots minstrelsy also promoted pastoral pas-
tiche 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 1 f a 1 f a l f a l 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 identity 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 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 Khan’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

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 textual 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 alternatives. 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 différence 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 minimalistic 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 alphanumeric 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, $\alpha f a$ appears to consist of transcendental letters that cannot be the root of equations with rational coefficients. Alphameric that present and represent are here encased within a quod that presents and represents. The small square, the $\text{QEF}$, the $\text{QED}$, $\text{quod erat faciendum}$, $\text{quod erat demonstrandum}$, 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 αlfa 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, pre-existent 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’ 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 parallelo-
grammatic ‘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 con-
temporary 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 lit-
erature 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 Mul-
donic poem that plays and puns on such postmodernist leitmotifs as origin,
identity, text and translation. Cognitive name cropping reappears in the hu-
morous 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 com-
municative 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 vol-
umes, 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, neologic lexicology that runs beyond the OED are: “bleeding image” or “imarrhage,” ‘narthecality’ and ‘conglomewriting,’ ‘cryptocurrent,’ ‘Londonderridean,’ ‘canon and colcannon.’ 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,’ ‘Al-lafuckians from Ballymoaney’ and ‘Queen Maybe.’ 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.

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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.

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.’ Addressing 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 clarification concerning the constitutional arrangements for Britain and Northern Ireland.

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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

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.\textsuperscript{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 information 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:

\begin{quote}
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)
\end{quote}

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

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’Baolí, 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

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. 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 equinestrian 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. 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)


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

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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. ‘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:

34Joseph 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 alternative 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 ‘Errata.’ 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 socio-political 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 hedgehoggy, the inverted, the unheimlich and derouté arrest and amplify the flow of signs and semantics: the misprinted italics 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 semi­ironic self­flagellation, 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 remergergence 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*.

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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.’

In a more mundane frame of reference, a focus on the flawed and the faulty as integrated and enabling aspects of human life counterbalances 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.

‘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 negative aspect of autonomy in art is imperative.

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37 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 5.
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 developed 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, melodic 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

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.