

Paul Muldoon and the Context of Postmodernity

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is not to rehearse the extant postmodernist readings of Muldoon's poetry, but to attempt to situate Muldoon within the constellation of contemporary Irish culture; in more general terms, to show how his poetry negotiates its late twentieth century context. The article proceeds by reviewing how Muldoon's poetry uses narrativity and how these narrative frameworks problematize historical agency and identity and the manner in which the poetry questions the heritage of the Enlightenment. The central part of the article is devoted to placing Muldoon within the processes of postmodernity, particularly its diasporic experience, the way it registers the contemporary mediascapes and the affective investment it records in the mobility of the globalized world.

The intention of my article is neither to rehearse the extant postmodernist readings of Muldoon's poetry nor to add another one to the growing stock-pile of interpretations. If at some points of my argument I refer to the poetics of postmodernism, I do so in order to foreground the manner in which Muldoon's poetry engages the context of postmodernity or whatever one chooses to call our late European lifeworlds. Therefore my primary task is not to pronounce upon his poetic strategies, but rather to attempt to situate Muldoon within the constellation of contemporary Irish culture, to show how it negotiates its late twentieth century-condition.

Charles Altieri begins his 1996 article on postmodernism and American poetry by suggesting that postmodernism as a theoretical concept is "dead" and that "it is unlikely to generate much significant new work" (764). This does not prevent him from pursuing in the rest of his argument a line of thought which could only have appeared within the debate on postmodernity. Furthermore, the short appendix to the article, in which he provides, as he labels them, "five basic discursive frameworks" for understanding postmodern culture, sheds doubt on his proclaiming the demise of postmodernism as a theoretical concept (Altieri 1996, 788). Some of the tenets of these frameworks are indispensable tools in any effort to cope with what, for better or worse, many observers have designated as the period of postmodernity. As a preliminary step I will extract two frameworks which, to a large extent, correspond to the themes that are the subject of my reading of Paul Muldoon's poetry.

To begin with, Altieri speaks of the ways in which the different arts have reacted to the formal and cultural values of late modernism. Although my analysis does not intend to tackle the literariness of Muldoon's texts, I will

draw attention to their distinctive narrativity as a procedure which cannot be said to belong to the favourite strategies of literary modernism. Altieri's second discursive framework, more to the point of my project, broadens the relevance of characterizations of art and applies them to the culture at large. Of those mentioned by Altieri, I will show how the general questioning of Enlightenment mores, the subversion of grand narratives and the context of late commodity, simulacral culture find their echoes in Muldoon's poetry. To add to these and make them more concrete I will show how Muldoon's incorporation of technical media, particularly cinema and television, and the placeless/global sites of his poetic world register its postmodern context.

In a recent article, Christina Hunt Mahony maintains that the work of four representative contemporary Irish poets—Heaney, Longley, Kinsella and Durcan—ought to be read within the context of "the delayed modernism" of Irish culture. To use another designation would be a "bad fit" but, as she points out earlier, this is not "to suggest that the writing of postmodern poetry is not being undertaken simultaneously in Ireland" (Mahony 1996, 83). To substantiate this claim she refers in passing to Paul Muldoon. Of course there have been others who have subsumed Muldoon under the rubric of postmodernism. Thus, Edna Longley writes that Muldoon's poetry "fits Kearney's account of postmodernist collage" (Longley 1994, 239) while Steven Matthews reads Muldoon in conjunction with Ciaran Carson as evidencing a postmodernist turn in Irish poetry (Matthews 1997, 187). These critical pronouncements corroborate the experience most readers have had on encountering Muldoon's poetry. Reading his texts after the works of poets who are usually mustered to propagate the cause of Irish poetry—and I believe that subjective judgements and institutional venues where this poetry is disseminated, especially outside Ireland itself, would evince a great deal of agreement—the reader will have probably been struck by its difference. It is this difference that will be the subject of my discussion.

1. Narrativity

Without once more listing the characteristics of postmodernism or rehearsing the way it relates to its antecedent stylistic formation, I will take it as a given that Muldoon's poetic exhibits the staple wares of literary postmodernism. However, what I want to underline is that the reader ought to keep in mind that Muldoon's array of postmodernist procedures is staged within a 'storied' framework. To generalize, the haphazardness and play with language and its many registers and the offhand manner he handles established lore is mirrored in the narrativity of Muldoon's poetic voice. Furthermore, it can be argued that the narrativity which I find in the majority of Muldoon's texts, replacing as it does the stasis of modernist images, is itself a marker of postmodernist writing. These narratives vary and the question that can be asked is to what extent do they use emplotment to

extract a configuration and therefore a meaning out of their succession of events.

Some of the poems in the *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) collection create this configuration and yield a satisfying resolution to the motifs deployed in the text. This applies, for instance, to the antithetical ending of "Anseo" (Muldoon 1986, 49) or the circularity achieved by way of repeating the destination "Foster's pool-room" at the points of departure and return (ll. 2 and 300) in "Immram" (1986, 58, 67). However, the same cannot be said, for example, of the baffling sequence "Armageddon, Armageddon", from the earlier *Mules* (1977) collection (1986, 35–41), nor of most of what Muldoon has written.

For the most part Muldoon's narrative lines are anecdotal, open-ended, their events seemingly unmotivated. An offhand conversational voice delineates an initial vignette, elaborates upon it but then, unaccountably, zigs or zags to something new, frequently outside the established register. The poet's strategy amounts to a refusal of coherence, a refusal to yield meaning. Unlike the decoder of modernism who seeks to wrench meaning from or to impose meaning upon the world through art or mythic paradigms, Muldoon's narratives leave the reader with shards and remnants, with a feeling of unease stemming from a lack of unifying structures. An observation made by Charles Scott in his discussion of postmodern language is of relevance here. He maintains that postmodern language has developed into "a complex thought of finite temporality without the controlling force of the idea of subjectivity". He goes on to state that the forces and mutations of this language have replaced the control of subjectivity and that as a consequence history is no longer a narrative of subjectivity (Scott cited in Silverman 1990, 50). Just as intertextual play and Muldoon's gallivanting through languages and their different registers are enabled by a lack of anchorage in a controlling force of reference and a unified subjectivity, the nature of Muldoon's use of narrative gestures to a problematization of historical agency and identity which is the next topic of my discussion.

2. History and Identity

Approaching Muldoon with a horizon of expectations shaped by the customary themes pertaining to the different ways of staging Irish identity, the reader cannot but notice their absence or their complex dispersion. A historical subjectivity and a poetics of identity which have been embodied, promulgated and negotiated in a great deal of Irish poetry are problematized, if not put under erasure, in Muldoon's texts. Regarding the habitual horizon of expectations, one cannot but mention the collection *Meeting the British* (1987) and the identically named poem. The reader approaches the poem drawn by the title which portends another installment of the conflictual tale of Ireland's wrongs. However, elements within the text such as landscape, the French language, the historical personages and the possessive ("our") in

front of "willow-tobacco" complicate the identification of the opening communal "we". The final couplet—"They gave us six fishhooks/and two blankets embroidered with smallpox" (1987, 16)—identifies the lyric voice as Indian and shows it to have usurped the wonted communal position held by the Irish in their relation to the threatening other.

Of course, the text leaves open the possibility of an allegorical reading, particularly because the identification of the American Indians and the Irish has been used in colonialist discourse where the latter were depicted as wild men and therefore fit objects of conquest. Mention should also be made of the fact that the Irish immigrants during the period of American industrialization were stereotyped as subhuman and on a par with the natives (Slotkin 1986). If a poem such as "Meeting the British" is read as an allegory of the plight of Ireland, Muldoon's poetry would remain within the modernist project and its concerns with nation and identity. It could also be considered a specimen of "oppositional postmodern narratives" which, according to Joseph Francese, reinscribe in the present the detritus of history, the experience of the marginalized, and in such a manner cause the recovered past to dialectically interact with the present (1997, 6). If we associate postmodernism with the multiplication of minoritarian discourses and the voicing of the historically silenced, then most of Irish poetry can be subsumed under postmodernism. However, this blurs necessary distinctions and obliterates the difference between, say, the poetics of rootedness characterizing so much of Irish poetry and Muldoon's poetic voice, as found, for instance, in "The Boundary Commission":

*You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain*

*Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
It might have been a wall of glass
That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder which side, if any, he should be on. (1986, 48)*

Simply put, the broader definition of postmodernism fails to account for the diffidence in that final line. If a large part of contemporary Irish poetry deals with issues of self and nation, Muldoon's seems to express, from a specific positioning which I hope to delineate in this reading, the sense of the undoing of the master narrative of nation and identity. This is only a part of the broader project of subverting inherited stories and dominant paradigms of understanding and appropriating the world.

3. Questioning the Enlightenment

The long title poem of Muldoon's 1990 collection *Madoc—A Mystery* has particular bearings on this thematic. Its tenuous narrative line encompasses various motifs, of which the two most important are Coleridge's and Southey's utopian scheme to found a Pantisocratic society in America and the legend of the Welsh prince Madoc who supposedly fled the turmoil of his land and disappeared in the American wilderness. Written according to Tim Kendall in the "tradition of the fragmented vision poem" (1995, 223) its different sections are headed by renowned names encompassing the history of Western thought. The relation the names have with the various sections is far from uniform and at times seems simply haphazard, a kind of oblique comment upon the monuments of European endeavour. A more poignant critique is staged in the description of the devastating consequences of colonialism. Brimming with American Indian words, *Madoc* "tacitly records a culture on the verge of being all but wiped out. The words provide a constant reminder of the Indian's presence even as the settlers, searching for their own 'inheritance', disinherit and destroy them" (Kendall 1995, 234).

As far as the heritage of Western thought is concerned, the following quotation from the section indicatively titled [*Hobbes*] illustrates what Muldoon is up to in this text:

Coleridge can no more argue from this faded blue
turtle's splay
above the long-house door to a universal
idea of 'blue' or 'turtle'

than from powder-horns, muskets,
paddles, pumpkins,
thingums, thingammies,
bear-oil against mosquitoes,

hatchets, hoes, digging-sticks,
knives, kettles,
steel combs, brass tacks,
corn-husk masks or ceremonial rattles

to anything beyond their names. The silent drums.
The empty cask of trade-rum. (1990, 92)

The deployment of brackets around each of the names of authority heading the different sections of the sequence puts under erasure the significance of their achievements. Closer to the theme of the Enlightenment, the opening stanza of the Hobbes section and its reference to Coleridge's inability to argue from, as Muldoon puts it, "turtle's splay" to a "universal idea" of it

indicates the enfeeblement of the ratio's ability to contain particulars. Simply put, the world is too variegated to submit to the ordering structures of the mind and human efforts cannot go "to anything beyond ... names".

Within this context, America is seen as providing the arena where the Enlightenment staged its projects of progress, rationality and control. As many have noted, one of the most powerful products of this project has been the master narrative of nation. Regarding this, the thematic of the American Indian can be seen as part of the larger role Muldoon assigns to the American polity, which is seen as an exemplary site of hybridization where boundaries and oppositions, so significant to the modern narrative of nation, blur and intermingle. Consider the following lines from "Promises, Promises" describing the return of the English explorer Raleigh to the American colony:

He will return, years afterwards,
To wonder where and why
We might have altogether disappeared,
Only to glimpse us here and there
As one fair strand in her braid,
The blue in an Indian girl's dead eye. (1986, 53)

The fluctuating anchorage of the lyric voice in the poem coupled with the mongrelization described in the quoted lines mount a challenge to any notion of stable identity and self-sufficiency. Coming from an Irish poet, we cannot but read these lines as questioning the exclusivist idea of nation which has been such a polemical issue within Irish culture.

It is apparent that I have foregrounded the American motifs as props of my argument. Of course this is hardly a novel insight as far as Irish poetry is concerned. The special relationship America has had with Ireland is a well-known fact, and from Oliver Goldsmith's famous eighteenth-century jeremiad "The Deserted Village" to Brian Coffey's 1962 "Missouri Sequence", the American continent has been both a place of exile and refuge defined in its relation to the Irish homeland. Even a late and cosmopolitan poet such as Derek Mahon cannot indulge the New World without rehearsing the wrongs of history, as we can see in his poem "Canadian Pacific":

From famine, pestilence and persecution
Those gaunt forefathers shipped abroad to find
Rough stone of heaven beyond the western ocean,
And staked their claim, and pinned their faith.
Tonight their children whistle through the dark.
Frost chokes the windows; they will not have heard
The wild geese flying south over the lakes
While the lakes harden beyond grief and anger—

The eye fanatical, rigid the soft necks,
The great wings sighing with a nameless hunger. (1991, 24)

The sense of historical continuity is not far from the surface here. Muldoon, on the other hand, breaks off these ties and without the ballast of the past embraces the instantaneousness of the present. I would argue that he is enabled to do so by the site of his annunciations, America itself as the geographical center of postmodernity.

4. Postmodernity

One cannot ignore Muldoon's expatriate status, the fact that he did move to the United States in the late 1980s, when dealing with the theme of postmodernity in his work. The biographical facts clearly mark him out as a postmodern intellectual who is, according to Niall Lucy, "freer to indulge a more heterogeneous mix of knowledges and interests in pursuit of a career" (1997, 20). However, although these are clearly contributing factors, I propose to indicate how the poetry itself engages postmodernity and how this engagement has bearings for the understanding of Irishness at this point of history.

Amongst the elements that have been mustered to characterize postmodernity I want to mention technology, movement and globalization as pertinent to Muldoon's work. Regarding the first item, there is the opening prose piece "The Key" in *Madoc* with its "remake" of a film for which the poet has a "special affection" (1990, 3). This affective investment in mediascapes emerges in "Immram" where media images provide the frame with which to comprehend elements within the field of perception. The stanza reads as follows:

We counted thirty-odd of those brown-eyed girls
Who ought to be in pictures,
Bronzed, bleached, bare-breasted,
Bare-assed to a man,
All sitting, cross-legged, in a circle
At the feet of this life-guard out of Big Sur
Who made an exhibition
Of his dorsals and his pectorals
While one by one his disciples took up the chant
The Lord is my surf-board. I shall not want. (1986, 65)

One could cull many other instances where the images of a media-saturated culture infiltrate the field of perception delineated in Muldoon's poetry. However, this does not mean that Muldoon is alone in registering the presence of, for instance, television in contemporary life. The following lines

from the section "Summer 1969" in Heaney's sequence "Singing School" from the *North* collection are a case in point:

We sat through death counts and bullfight reports
On the television, celebrities
Arrived from where the real thing still happened. (1975, 69)

Like in much of Muldoon, the voice is positioned abroad. However, the reader is struck by the extent to which the whole text, its themes and particularly its imagery, although gesturing to its Spanish setting, ultimately refers to the Irish problematic. Heaney cannot escape the painful drama being staged back in Belfast. Through the televised images flickering on the screen he seeks the authentically real. In line with the theme of postmodernity, it could be said that Muldoon, coming later, would no longer maintain the distinction between representation and reality, nor is he, to use Heaney's phrase from the above-mentioned poem, "greaved in a bog". If in Heaney's lines the TV screen emanates a gravitational pull drawing the poetic voice back to another scene of Ireland's tragic history, in Muldoon the poet is cut loose and immersed in the tantalizing flicker of mediated signs.

Muldoon's engagement with telecommunication technology is updated in the "Yarrow" sequence of *The Annals of Chile* (1994a) collection. On a superficial level, there is the mention of the latest electronic gadgets: a V.C.R. (52), a video camera capable of being hooked either to the alarm or the TV (152), cassettes (152). In addition, there is the intertextual gesturing to cinematic products dispersed throughout the text. On a more significant level, the backdrop of media technology marks the site of enunciation of the sequence, the zero point from which the poetic voice recuperates the past and indulges in its surrealistic fantasies. The delineation of this place of writing permeated by the flickering of media representations begins in the ninth fragment of the sequence:

I zap the remote control: that some poor elk or eland
dragged down by a bobolink;
a Spanish *Lear*; the umpteenth *Broken Arrow*;

a boxing match; Robert Hughes dismantling Dada;
a Michael Jackson video
in which our friends, the Sioux, will peel

the face off a white man whose metacarp-
al bones, with those of either talus,
they've already numbered; the atmosphere's so rare

that if Michael's moon-suit of aluminium foil

were suddenly to split at the seams
he'd not only buy, but fertilize, the farm. (47)

Much later, in the hundred-eighteenth section of the sequence, the media screen seems to function as a kind of metaphor for the sequence itself:

For I'd not be surprised if this were a video
camera giving me a nod and a wink
from the blue corner (152)

The deictic marker can refer both to the flickering screen, which is apparently turned on throughout the writing of the poem, and to Muldoon's text itself. Further on in the sequence, the temporal positioning of the time of writing, "it's 1.49", is accompanied by a baffling glut of messages from the video "now so wildly out of synch" (170). The final allusion to this complex of motifs appears in a section approaching the end of the sequence where we again read of "our friends the Sioux" excoriating Michael Jackson (182). The backdrop of media images and stories helps construct at least one of the narrative frameworks of the sequence. One way of assessing the use of this thematic is to see it as showing Muldoon's recognition that the contemporary site of writing is contaminated or distracted by the influx of technologically mediated images.

Much of Muldoon's poetry is in a state of flux. Muldoon expresses an affective investment in the mobility of the contemporary world. In *The Prince of the Quotidian* (1994b) this is expressed in the following manner:

The more I think of it, the more I've come to love
the tidal marshes of Hackensack,
the planes stacked
over Newark (13)

No longer sedentary, the poet relishes the mobility of plane travel and the movement it enables through the sites evoked by the toponyms of his poetry. In "Ontario" (1987, 1) or later in "The Key" (1990, 3) the poet travels between distant cities on the American continent. However, these toponyms are disembodied, more airport lounges than the cities of human habitation. The ease of movement which the reader experiences in Muldoon's poetry has certain consequences which set him at odds with the pronounced sense of place evident in so much of Irish poetry. As James Ogilvy has written:

... disintegration of the near/far structure of human experience ...
The equalization of the near and the far accomplished by high-speed
transportation ... renders the entire phenomenon of *locality* less

significant and hence less a source of sharing than it once was. (cited in Entikin 1991, 57)

In the terms of the geographer Marcus Doel, Muldoon's poetry has less to do with the "prepositional sedentary fixation" of the "*from, in, at*" than it *takes place* and is therefore "neither situated nor contained within a particular location, but is instead splayed out and unfolded across a myriad of vectors" (Doel 1999, 7). These vectors form a recognizable late twentieth-century topography.

A great deal of Muldoon's poetry mirrors in its own ludic manner the fragmentation and complexity of experience within the global setting which has become the framework for the postmodern subject. In the poem "The Sonogram", which appears both in *The Prince of the Quotidian* and in *The Annals of Chile*, we have the following indicative comparison:

Only a few weeks ago, the sonogram of Jean's womb
resembled nothing so much
as a satellite-map of Ireland (29)

To return to Ogilvy's phrase, Muldoon's poetry, compared to the emphatically rooted poetic voices of most of his compatriots, provides a lesser "source of sharing" in the communal experience. However, if we picture the image of a satellite-mediated map of Ireland, then I would contend that Muldoon's text integrates Ireland into a global constellation. This constellation provides both a context which determines the behaviour of the fragmented subjectivities Muldoon parades through his lyrics and a frame of reference within which the assemble of lyric voices "figure their existence, identities, and actions". To continue with John Tomlinson's pronouncements on globalization, its development creates a complex social and phenomenological condition "in which different orders of human life are brought into articulation with one another" (Tomlinson 1999, 11).

The question that must be addressed at this point is, do Muldoon's texts relish or deplore the latest developments? I would propose that they stage a relation of complicity with the state of postmodernity. I would even contend that there is a celebratory tone in Muldoon which refuses to participate in the agonizing search for authenticity of so much of Irish poetry. However, this does not mean that the markers of an Irish identity have wholly evaporated. Muldoon's poetry, in its own way, engages the contemporary context of identitarian politics and, showing how Irishness is positioned in the networks and flows of power of postmodern culture, problematizes the dualities of the local and the global and their different manifestations.

Let me briefly elaborate upon this. Throughout its history, Ireland's "proximity" to the United Kingdom was, to borrow Terence Brown's

phrasing, its gravest problem (Brown 1985, 15). This geographical given facilitated its victimage, hampered its struggle for independence and was one of the causes of what Brown depicts as its twentieth-century national narcissism. What I want to underline is that it was precisely its geographical position within the trans-Atlantic circulation of goods and ideas that enabled Ireland to enter and assume its place in contemporary developments. The privileged place English has received in today's world has also played a vital role in promoting Irish culture. In a paradoxical sense, the causes and consequences of Ireland's historical wrongs—its colonization and its loss of language—have turned out to be a boon for its entry onto the stage of late twentieth-century European civilization. This is the site out of which Muldoon enunciates his postmodern poetics.

Of course the older attachments and solidarities have not evaporated into thin air. The local and the global do not rule each other out but interact in complex and unpredictable ways. This openness to the changed context and the knowledge that older certainties no longer hold is perhaps the crucial element in Muldoon's poetics. In the closing section of the poem "The Earthquake" he describes the following scene:

Her arm goes out to check for rain—
a shoulder-bruise

as from a rifle-butt—
and finds *Radio Eireann*. (1987, 22)

The bruise and the rifle simile as well as the radio, which I read as synecdoche of the national narcissism of de Valera's Ireland, epitomize a particular Irish identity. However, the final line of the poem denigrates the provincial isolation of the previous image. It reads as follows: "Ireland has moved; they haven't" (1987, 22). Muldoon recognizes that Ireland has moved. His frame of reference is broader than the one mapped by the discourse of nation. He looks at it from an exterior vantage point, one which is networked into the global context and one which has little sympathy for the self-protective insularity of a culture harking back to a time of simple pieties.

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