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WIT PIETRZAK

**FOR ‘MYTHICAL’ READ ‘EMPATHIC’:  
PAUL MULDOON’S ‘THIRD EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY’  
AND ‘THE BANGLE (SLIGHT RETURN)’ AS EXERCISES  
IN EMPATHY**

**Abstract**

The paper focuses on the notion of empathy in contrast to systemic ethics in Paul Muldoon’s two poems, “Third Epistle to Timothy” and “The Bangle (Slight Return),” from his 1998 collection, *Hay*. Ethics is here entwined with what T. S. Eliot described as the mythical method. It is argued here that Muldoon resorts to the formal paradigm but works his way beyond the transcendental, religion-motivated position adopted by Eliot, particularly in his later social critiques. On the one hand, in “third Epistle to Timothy,” I investigate the biblical context of the poem to demonstrate that all externally-imposed codes of ethic can be subject to corruption. On the other, in “The Bangle (Slight Return),” I show that the mythical references, rather than corroborate an elitist agenda, indicate that to embody an experience of another person’s different a polymorphous language is needed that would simultaneously be used with full responsibility for whatever it should evoke.

**Keywords**

*Paul Muldoon; Contemporary Irish poetry; T. S. Eliot; empathy*

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Paul Muldoon’s last volume of poetry to be published in the twentieth century, *Hay*, is in a number of respects a transitory collection.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it followed *The Annals of Chile* (1994), a volume that after its release Seamus Heaney called “[Muldoon’s] best so far” (2003: 431). On the other, *Hay* was followed by

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another widely-praised volume, *Moy Sand and Gravel* (2002), for which Muldoon won the Pulitzer Prize. Despite its lesser fame, however, *Hay* plays a pivotal role in Muldoon's development as poet, for it is in this volume that he confronts a tension between privilege and deprivation on the one hand and correctness and error (in regard to language, social stature and ethics) on the other. As the speakers in *Hay* are anxious that "All great artists are their own greatest threat" (Muldoon 2001: 417), the poems repeatedly meander between a desire to "shed light on what had seemed obscure" (Muldoon 2001: 37) and a levity in the construction of images: "Go figure," as Muldoon puts it at the close of "Rune" (2001: 450). The declared search for an epiphany is consistently joined with evocations of systems of thought and belief external to the poem itself. In this capacity, throughout *Hay* Muldoon summons T. S. Eliot, a poet who befits the fear expressed in *Hay* of sapped creativity, given that his own poetic resources dried up shortly after the publication of the *Four Quartets* (1943). Even though nowhere in *Hay* is Eliot summoned up by name, his work, poetic as well as essayistic, is alluded to on several occasions (the other two poets who feature as prominently are Yeats and Wallace Stevens). In "Green Gown," the violated female protagonist is named Marie, thus making one think of the opening sequence of *The Waste Land*; in "Long Finish," the poet's wife is conjured up through the image of "Princess of Accutane" (2001: 441) in a way that suggests Eliot's use of two lines from Gérard de Nerval: "*Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*" (Eliot 2002: 69). However, it is Eliot's formal experiments that underpin the method of the longer poems in *Hay*, especially of "Third Epistle to Timothy" and the sequence of thirty sonnets "The Bangle (Slight Return)." I would like to suggest that, being caught between the upper-middle class, a stature that Eliot cherished, and a proclivity for a vagabond existence, the speakers in the two poems balance between what may be called, travestying Eliot, the mythical mode and an empathic intervention.

In "Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*," a lecture contemporaneous with *Hay*, Muldoon makes several points that illuminate his poetics. Firstly, he asserts that his critical method consists in teasing out poetic influences that lie behind poems. Later, in his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Muldoon will claim that Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* "remains one of the most illuminating contributions to our understanding of the working of poets and poetry" (2006: 41). In "Getting Round," however, Muldoon adds that his understanding of influence is embodied in the idea of the Metaphysical conceit; he borrows from Helen Gardner the definition of conceit as "a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike; a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness" (Gardner 1957: 19; Muldoon 1998: 108–109). Muldoon seems to be partial to the definition due to its emphasis on the tension between two different things that are made to appear strikingly similar and the fact that irrespective of the closeness between the two we must nonetheless concede their unlikeness. This tension informs Muldoon's second injunction: "On one hand I'm arguing for the

supremacy of 'unknowing,' for the Keatsian model of poet as conduit, channel, the 'belly' from which a poem is ventriloquized [...]. On the other I'm arguing for the almost total 'knowing'" (Muldoon 1998: 119–120). The former formula is in tune with poststructuralist and deconstructionist views of the art of writing, particularly with Paul de Man's suggestion that a text constitutes itself following the grammar of tropes that govern the "potential inherent in language" (De Man 1979: 37). The latter proposition, as Muldoon acknowledges, may be regarded as "a mere rehash, perhaps a mere hash, of New Criticism, with its insistence on the autonomy of the text (Muldoon 1998: 120). Such criticism of "knowingness" notwithstanding, Muldoon is clearly pressing for a conception of the writerly effort as an exercise in assuming responsibility: "it's the poet's job to take into account, as best he or she is able, all possible readings of the poem" (Muldoon 1998: 120). Michael Robbins shows that by insisting on the formula of the poet's knowingness Muldoon "asks us to complicate and expand our definition of 'intention' [...]" further removed from normative intentionality, attributing to authors puns in titles they did not actually use for their work" (Robbins 2011: 271–272). Therefore when Muldoon defines the practice of "imarrhaging," a creation of images that bleed into other images even beyond the poet's intended scope, he revels in language's protean nature but also suggests that such encryption (Robbins uses the term "crypto word") of other words in the words actually employed by the poet is another aspect of a poem "for which the speaker must take responsibility, though he has not uttered [the encrypted word] or even anything like it" (Robbins 2011: 274). Thus Robbins uncovers an ethical demand inherent in Muldoon's critical and, by inference, poetic method. While Muldoon, in one of his interviews, "disavows the notion that poetry is a moral force," he adds that what poetry does not do is offer "respite or retribution" (Muldoon 1998: 127). Rather than alleviate our suffering or demand punishment for misdeeds, poetry is conceived of as a way of dealing with unlikeness, difference and otherness.

By taking responsibility for his conceits, whereby unlike ideas or figures are brought together, the poet, according to Muldoon, admits of the contingency of poetic praxis while at the same time accepting that the contingency does not lift the ethical mandate laid on the poet. Moreover, the ethical gesture that is implied in "Getting Round" rescinds the perception of ethics as a system of values and impositions that dictate the path to right conduct. Instead, this ethics works on the level of empathic intervention between individuals. Anthony Clohesy argues that empathy represents an "experience of difference" that allows us to understand that "everything in the world comes into being as a result of the violence we commit to [...] Difference" (Clohesy 2013: 3). He builds on Kathleen Lundeen's idea that empathy "is an ideal of differentiated union with another" in which "there are shared borders of identity that we are compelled to recognize but cannot cross" (2001: 92). Therefore to recognise the other as different precludes the implementation of a systemic ethics, for no two encounters with the other follow the same pattern of interactions and so the prospective crises must remain irreducible to any finite set of prescribed rules. This leads Clohesy to the idea that "the

empathic experience of difference should be seen as an epiphanic moment, as something that *interrupts* us” (2013: 6 emphasis in original). This understanding of the epiphanic moment no longer yields to what Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus calls *quidditas*, “the instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony [...]” (Joyce 1977: 193). Instead, it becomes a thoroughly negative moment in that the experience of the other alerts us to the irreconcilable difference that we come to recognise though never fully apprehend.

Throughout *Hay* Muldoon invokes multiple encounters with various individuals, some of whom are close family – typically mother, father or wife – some are made-up partners like Longbones, others represent historical characters like Virgil or mythological heroes like Aeneas or Creusa, others still are lifted from literature like Hermia and Lysander. It is in “The Bangle (Slight Return)” that most of these figures, who have already been summoned in the shorter poems, meet within a single narrative. Therefore the impression that the poem creates is that all the persons, whether long dead or still living, real or fictional, inhabit the same temporal moment. The poem opens with Publius Vergilius Maro observing, as he will do repeatedly throughout the poem, that ““The beauty of it [...] / is that your father and the other skinnymalinks / might yet end up a pair of jackaroos / in the canefields north of Brisbane”” (Muldoon 2001: 459). The fact that Virgil knows of Australia already signals what liberties the poem is going to take with temporality. Moreover, a little later we learn why the father may end up a jackaroo: “The Beauty of it is that I delivered them from harm; / it was I who had Aeneas steal / back to look for Creusa” (2001: 459). It transpires that Virgil is actually talking to one of his characters, who is being sent by the poet’s fancy to Brisbane to start in the sheep herding business, just like Aeneas was sent to look for Creusa as they were fleeing Troy in Book II of the *Aeneid*. In an early interview, Muldoon admitted: “I seem to remember my father telling me that he determined once to emigrate to Australia. Now he tells me it was a hen’s yarn;” he also explains that this image “troubled me for ages, since it underlies the arbitrary nature of so many decisions we take, the disturbingly random quality of so many of our actions. I would speculate on my father’s having led an entirely different life, in which, clearly, I would have played no part” (Muldoon 1980: 1). What in the interview he ascribed to arbitrariness, now is vested in Virgil, or a fictional representation of the Roman poet that decides on the fates of his characters.

In Part III of “The Bangle (Slight Return),” Virgil’s self-important ponderings give way to a new scene: “A restaurant off the Champs-Élysées. Ray’s wing. Consommé” (Muldoon 2001: 460). Here the speaker, who will be revealed as Paul Muldoon himself (2001: 468), recounts his protracted visit in the company of a woman to a restaurant in Paris, during which he indulges his gourmet palate, feasting on the likes of “The *gâteau au framboises et fraises*” (2001: 460). As course after course is being ordered, the speaker suddenly introduces “my da and that other larrikin” who “trotted off down the road between Duchess, maybe, and

Dajarra / to join the rest of the cane snedders” (2001: 461). Subsequently “my da and that other jolly swagman” are joined by “The Greeks’ al-al-al-alalalal / as they fought hand-to-hand / under the shadow of Troy’s smoke blackened walls” (2001: 462). These and many more narratives are superimposed on one another to form a space of simultaneity, to which only Virgil seems to have access. He appears to be a trickster figure who derives perverse pleasure from abusing his characters but he also resembles Eliot’s Tiresias, intoning: “I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest” (Eliot 2002: 61). Indeed, the construction of “The Bangle (Slight Return),” with Virgil and the narrative borrowed from Book II of the *Aeneid* as coherence devices and the Meta-physical conceit as the leading trope, roughly corresponds to what Eliot defined as “the mythical method.”

In his review of *Ulysses*, Eliot famously argues that Joyce’s use of myth “is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (2005: 167). This observation also informs the broadly-defined function of mythological references in “The Bangle (Slight Return)” in that all the various characters’ stories are framed by mythical references, thereby turning the poem into a structure of networked narratives. The mythical method, however, does not only represent an aesthetic device but also operates within Eliot’s ethical system. In “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” Eliot observes that “a man of genius is responsible to his peers, not to a studio full of uneducated and undisciplined coxcombs” (2005: 166). Thus the true writer, in Eliot’s formulation of the notion from “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” must always write under the stricture that his work will have to conform to, and at its best add to, the standards set by the great writers of the past: “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, ‘values’ of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (Eliot 1999: 15 emphasis in original). While Eliot admits that new work changes the pre-existent hierarchical order, he also stresses that this process is no upheaval but a re-arrayed conformity, which expresses the poem’s allegiance to the peers of the past.

So formulated, the mythical method may be viewed as a literary equivalent (but never replacement, as Eliot came to abhor the idea that literature could become a new form of religion) of Christianity as the foundation of society. For Eliot, the modern world is a time of struggle between Christianity and what he terms “new paganism.” Whereas the latter represents all that is not rooted in the transcendent, the former derives from an age-old and irrefutable sanction. As a result, it is Christianity that should be accepted as the bedrock for the organisation of a society so that “the religious life of the people would be largely a matter of behaviour and conformity; social customs would take on religious sanctions” (Eliot 1949: 27). What Eliot desires is a society founded on “the permanent” and “the absolute,” with particular politics being motivated first and foremost by dogma

(Eliot 1949: 45). In this way society as a political unit and the society of writers become largely synonymous in the formation of “the Community of Christians,” or the people who boast “the highest intellectual and spiritual standards” (Xiros Cooper 2009: 295). What “the Community of Christians” requires of citizens who aspire to enter the elite (a term to which Eliot devotes much space in *Notes toward the Definition of Culture*), similarly to the literary tradition’s demand from the budding poet, is to fulfil the duty laid on them. While in social terms, the duty is represented by Christianity’s superior ethic, in literary terms, it is represented by the mythical method as a direct means of contact with the tradition of the best writing. Eliot’s understanding of ethics and poetics as crucially subservient to the dogmatic framework and responsible for its implementation owes much to F. H. Bradley. In *Ethical Studies*, Bradley takes up Kant’s division “that separates [? one’s] inclination to act out of personal advantage or thoughtless habit, from one’s moral duty to act out of respect for the law.” While Kant concludes that one’s morality stems from the categorical imperative, Bradley “improves on Kant by setting the self in the organic context of ‘my station and its duties’” (Oser 2007: 55). The “station and its duties” that dictate one’s moral decisions recur as the central motif of *The Idea of Christian Society*, where Eliot refers the “station” or stature to “the Community of Christians,” what Xiros Cooper regards as the religion-inflected modern-day intelligentsia (2009: 294), while the duty that this station entails is for Eliot the responsibility one owes to dogma.

Circulating around the notions of eternity and transcendence, “Burnt Norton” (1935) to some extent gives a poetic voice to the idea of society being organised by the subservience to an eternal and absolute religious system. The opening image of “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past” (Eliot 2002: 177) starts by asserting its tonal certainty but moves on to concede speculation, as the speaker resorts to the modal “perhaps” that later is developed in the image of ineffectiveness of such ponderings that “[Remain] a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation” (2002: 177). At the level of the poem’s proposition the idea of meaning formulated in language patterns is challenged, for words, like the guests in the garden, can only move “in a formal pattern, / Along the empty alley, into the box circle” (2002: 178). However, as Part II indicates, these meanderings do have “the still point” which is “Neither flesh nor fleshless; / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity” (2002: 179). The centre of this meditation is thus revealed not to inhere in the meanings of the words, as they are compromised in the paradoxical formulations of Part II, but in “those music-like formulations of structure and rhythms” (Murphy 2007: 199). Following the musical analogy, “Burnt Norton,” as do the other *Quartets*, shows itself to be an exploration of the transcendent realm, the space beyond man’s cognitive capacity, which can only be approached through inklings of the eternal in the transient. Although “Words move, music moves / Only in time,” thus offering no path beyond “the silence,” their movement is not in vain provided they follow a pattern, for “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still

/ Moves perpetually in its stillness" (2002: 181–182). The Chinese jar, however, does not fully suffice for Eliot, like the urn for Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or the sculpture for Yeats in "Lapis Lazuli," for in itself the jar remains just another pattern. What seems crucial is that from the pattern emanates a furtive light of the eternal. "Burnt Norton" ends by suggesting that one such glimmering of the eternal is to be found in love understood dually as "Only the cause and end of movement, / Timeless and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being" (2002: 182). The passage suggests that there is love "in the aspect of time" which in itself cannot escape being trapped "Between un-being and being;" but in this feeling of earthly love, there lies the inkling of love "unmoving," which in Christian terms (suggested by the allusion to St. John of the Cross's "figure of the ten stairs") is "God's unconditional love" that "is beyond time" (Kramer 2007: 63). Eliot may here also be thinking of St. Paul's idea of love as the greatest of God's gifts (1 Cor. 13:13). In this sense the concluding image of "Burnt Norton," evoking an Edenic "Sudden shaft of light," "intuits redemptive life [...] by reminding [the speaker] to become fully present in the succession of nows" (Kramer 2007: 63).

What "Burnt Norton" suggests, and the remaining *Quartets* elaborate on, is that the present world can only overcome "its metallated ways," the inferno of "Tumid apathy" (Eliot 2002: 180) that Part III of the poem conjures up with such force, if people attend to the patterns of words, music and dance in which lie those glimmerings of the eternal. Although there seems to be no ordering device used in "Burnt Norton" in the sense that Eliot gives to Joyce's employment of the *Odyssey*, the mythical method broadly understood as a means of contacting the absolute by orchestrating patterns of language remains in play. By stressing the requisite nature of pattern-creation, "Burnt Norton" gives credence to its meditative opening lines in that they can recursively be perceived as an attempt to think oneself through to the eternal. In this way "Burnt Norton" poetically reworks the idea offered in Eliot's social criticism, for it demonstrates that the true duty of "the Christian Community," and one that becomes its station, is to search in the aleatory languages for the absolute truth, which alone grants the ethical prerogative to re-organise the time-bound world.

Eliot's idea that only by complying with the duty to the religious dogma can one become responsibly attuned to the higher ethic is the focal point of Muldoon's "Third Epistle to Timothy." The poem both approaches an understanding of religious duty close to that of Eliot's and departs from it, revealing its potentially deadly shortcomings. The poem reverts to 1923 and evokes the poet's father, Patrick Muldoon, at eleven, as he is living on Wesley Cummins' farm, where he helps with horses and hay harvest. The title of the poem alludes to St. Paul's two Epistles to Timothy, in which he instructs the younger priest: "thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God" (1 Timothy 3:15). In the poem, however, the exhortation to "Neglect not the grace that is in thee" (1 Timothy 4:14) is blatantly violated by Cummins, who abuses the young Muldoon, quoting none other than St. Paul: "though you speak with the tongue /

of an angel, I see you for what you are...Malevolent. / Not only a member of the church malignant but a *malevolent* spirit” (2001: 453 emphasis in original). The political context engulfs the poem, as Cummins’ reason for abhorring Muldoon is the fact that his underling is a Catholic and by inference a rebel, fighting on the Republican side. “Third Epistle to Timothy,” however, not only indicts Cummins’ cruelty but also his lack of subservience to the Epistles he quotes; after all, Paul dismisses schisms as mere earthly preoccupations (1 Cor. 3:1–3). Moreover, the duty that religion imposes on man is only as good as the man. In the poem, Cummins’ appeal to Paul is patchy and unfaithful to the Epistles and yet serves the farmer[? former] as grounds for attacking the young Muldoon. What the parabolic story in “Third Epistle to Timothy” implies is that what Cummins knows is “mere timothy,” as the incipit from Benjamin Franklin puts it (Muldoon 2001: 451), but certainly not Paul’s Timothy.

On the other hand, as Clair Wills notes, “we could think of Cummins as a perverse embodiment of the poet (after all he’s always quoting Paul); like the poet he mixes up his allusions and twists clichés” (1998: 206). It is in “Symposium” that Muldoon gives a *tour de force* of adage perversion, sticking and unsticking clichéd sayings from “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it hold / its nose to the grindstone” to “There’s no smoke after the horse is gone” (2001: 409). While in “Symposium,” this adage-shifting is relished by the speaker, who clearly enjoys his linguistic ingenuity, in “Third Epistle to Timothy,” such levity is demonstrated to lead to dire consequences. Furthermore, it is St. Paul who warns against “profane babblings” (2 Timothy 2:16), which may cause people to “turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:4). Thus Muldoon *père* suffers at the hands of Cummins, who uses the words of St. Paul to abuse him, but also is the subject of attack because Cummins takes poet-like liberties with the Apostle’s words. As a result, “Third Epistle to Timothy” offers a criticism of a religion-motivated ethic, which is represented by Cummins, as well as a complete irresponsibility for the kind of word play that one indulges in. This point, in turn, leads back to “Getting Round,” the essay whose strength lies in its recurrent treatment of a series of images so that something is revealed at each turn of the critical apparatus. It is the poet’s “total unknowingness” that allows the sort of liberties that Cummins takes with the New Testament, while the “knowingness” manifests itself in “Third Epistle to Timothy” not in accepting an exterior code of ethics but in attempts to discover an empathic affinity between the speaker and his father. This is achieved by establishing intertextual links between the story of the father, as it is told in the poem, and the poems throughout *Hay* that focus on Muldoon the son.

In Part IV of “Third Epistle to Timothy,” the only fragment in which the father is quoted as replying to Cummins, the speaker pauses over the “servant boy / on the point of falling asleep” (Muldoon 2001: 452). Just as the father is “on the point,” so is the speaker-son in “The Point,” a poem in which Muldoon recalls an incident from his own school-days when he must have been around his father’s age:

What everything in me wants to articulate  
 is this little bit of a scar that dates  
 from the time O'Clery, my schoolroom 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. (2001: 400)

The fact that O'Clery's attack is shown in such a hyperbolic manner again suggests the speaker's levity, which is further amplified by the allusion to Sato's "consecrated blade" (Muldoon 2001: 400; Yeats 1996: 235), a katana given to Yeats by Juntzo Sato during their meeting in March 1920, in Portland, when Yeats was on a lecture tour in the US. Yeats evokes the sword in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," where it represents the transient glory of impure life that the poet embraces in preference to Heaven because the latter leaves one "stricken deaf and dumb and blind" (Yeats 1996: 235). Although Yeats chooses life, declaring himself "content to live it all again / And yet again" (1996: 236), he is still devoted to a notion of transcendence when he cries "When such as I cast out remorse / [...] / We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest" (1996: 236). Muldoon jeers at this earth-bound yearning for a blessing and Yeats's lofty tone, as he stately declaims: "The consecrated blade upon my knees / Is Sato's ancient blade" (1996: 235).

When "The Point" is considered in reference to "Third Epistle to Timothy," it transpires that the tone of derisive frivolity turns to sarcasm. The glib evocation of O'Clery's attack on the speaker's thigh does not bear comparison with the hardship that his father had to endure at the hands of Cummins. Though both father and son are "on the point," the senior's experience, trying to fend off roundworms by placing paraffin under the legs of his bed, serves as a shaming comment on the son's life of privilege. Furthermore, in Part V, the description of plants suddenly becomes detailed, as the speaker enumerates "meadow cat's-tail, lucerne, the leaf upon trodden leaf / of white clover" (2001: 452–453). These plants call up "Hay," in which the adult speaker sees a "beat-up Volvo / carrying a load // of hay" that is parenthetically explained to be "a bale of lucerne or fescue or alfalfa" (2001: 418). Muldoon's attachment to Irish flora, at least since *The Annals of Chile*, has often signified redemption; on the other hand, in "Third Epistle to Timothy," which invites speculation as to which is meant, Timothy or timothy, images of hay and various other plants serve to recall a communality that is gone from the world of Muldoon *père* and Cummins. However, it is through lucerne and bales of hay that the speaker-son is able to find an empathic ground with the father. Muldoon has spoken of his father as "a very refined man – but not educated" (Brown 2002: 186). Additionally, in a much earlier poem, "The Mixed Marriage," Muldoon evoked his father as a man who knows the country ways as opposed to his mother, a schoolteacher and a prim lover of canonical literary figures. It is little wonder then that in "Third Epistle to Timothy," the speaker

uncovers a link to his father in the labour that they shared at one point in their lives. Elsewhere the speaker suggests that they both slept in confined, six-by-six rooms. But whereas the father lodged in such claustrophobic conditions, the speaker, as he confesses in “Blissom,” only visited a room of this size during a liaison with one Agnieszka (2001: 443).

Therefore what seems to be an attempt to empathise with the father’s plight reveals a powerful sense of the incommensurateness of their experiences. Wills notes that “the portrayal of his father’s early life might suggest [...] a bad conscience about his own life of ease and indulgence” (1998: 206) but the situation seems more serious, for the speaker does not cringe at how difficult an existence his father led; in fact there is little in *Hay* that would suggest compassion. Still, the numerous, subtle cross-references that Muldoon scatters across the volume suggest a growing discomfort in the speaker, as he uncovers a history of abuse. “Third Epistle to Timothy” concludes in an “image of Lizzie, / Hardy’s last servant girl” who

reaches out from her dais  
of salt hay, stretches out an unsunburned arm  
half in bestowal, half beseechingly, the turns away to appeal  
to all that spirit troop  
of hay treaders[.] (2001: 455)

The “spirit troop” might again allude to Yeats, this time to his evocation of the Sidhe, with the difference being that in Yeats, “The host riding from Knocknarea” (Yeats 1996, 56) signifies an inhuman power, whereas in Muldoon’s poem, the “troop,” as Holdridge suggests, represent a “hopeful gesture;” the hay treaders “are above the formless void” and so beyond Thomas Hardy’s “deterministic universe” in which there is no escaping the final tragedy (Holdridge 2008: 142). Though Holdridge fails to account for the hopefulness in the ending of the poem, it transpires that the hay treaders, along with Lizzie, constitute an image of community that the speaker’s father belongs to. As a result, “Third Epistle to Timothy” enacts a moment of interruption, to refer to Clohesy’s term, in which his empathic experience of different personal dramas shakes the speaker, elsewhere seen “Barefoot, in burgundy shorts and a salmon-pink / T-shirt” (2001: 438), out of his complacency. Therefore “Third Epistle to Timothy” achieves at the level of empathic encounter what religiously-motivated ethics could not. Unlike in the case of Cummins’ perversion of St. Paul, the empathic experience of difference relies on no external system, as the responsibility is taken before another person rather than before Eliot’s abstract community of peers or Christians.

In “The Bangle (Slight Return),” the moment of interruption is thematised more directly than in “Third Epistle to Timothy” or anywhere else in *Hay*. The suggestion that the speaker’s contentment with life, an acceptance of his Bradleian “station,” if not so much of duties the station entails, is put in sharp contrast with the story of his father’s trip to Australia and the collapse of the house

of Priam. Wills identifies a simultaneity of lives and a “concern with fate and possibility, with what had to be and what might have been” as principal themes of the poem (1998: 210). Holdridge, on the other hand, has suggested that Muldoon’s retelling of the myth of the Trojan war with attention given to Creusa, “almost a forgotten figure of history,” highlights “the loss inherent in the epic cycle” (2008: 151). The images of these simultaneous lives, however, are consistently juxtaposed so as to emphasise the contrast between privation and complacency that span thousands of years, as a result implying that there is a certain recurrence to the pattern of inequality. Even if the method that Muldoon employs might seem similar to Eliot’s, his evocation of historical patterns, though relying to some extent on mythological allusions, is thoroughly un-Eliotean. Whether in *The Waste Land* or in the *Four Quartets*, Eliot is preoccupied with human suffering on a transcendent plain. By contrast Muldoon keeps his eye close to the people steeped in their own particular troubles and pains; thus as the speaker’s father “hurtled through the canefields / on some flea-bitten / cow pony,” the son is being recommended “a little glass of the Beaunne / or maybe a little glass of the Sauternes” (2001: 465). Furthermore, as “the Greeks made their way through the aftermath / of the battle, their unruly / locks all blood-brilliant from the blood-bath,” the waiter asks the speaker “*Si Monsieur l’épicure / voudrait un petit verre de Muscat*” (2001: 454–465). This context of destitution and affluence, both of which are perceived as simultaneous (as eventually the speaker also finds himself in an awkward position when the waiter informs him that “*votre Amex est, en tout cas...expired*” [2001: 471]), is further delimited as relating to uprooted people. Again, the juxtapositions reveal a sharp contrast, for while the speaker, an Irishman, is enjoying his stay (whether temporal or permanent) in France, his father, another Irishman, is labouring his way across Australia and Aeneas and Creusa have just lost their home.

By developing the several narratives side by side, Muldoon implies a question of empathic awareness of the predicaments of others. While the speaker does not seem to take any note of the suffering that is taking place at the same time as he is indulging his palate, the poem seeks to juxtapose their experiences. The various stories intersect not only through the use of temporal pronouns (“as” and “when” are the most typical ways of switching between the different narratives) but also in the evocations of food and drink as well as a melange of words that derive from Australian English, Hiberno-English and French, with a pinch of neologisms. As a result, these discrete storylines are brought together within the experience of language’s protean and aleatory nature. It is in Part XXVII that these multiple connections are evoked jointly:

As [Creusa] twinkled there for a moment, distant-near as Alpha Centauri,  
I recognized the opening bars  
not of “Jane Shore” or “Clerk Saunders”  
but “Waltzing Mathilda,” played by some veteran of the Great War

on a mouth organ  
 and the waiter again drew himself up,  
 his three-fold cord broken  
 at last, and my da took out a plug of Erinmore and a box of Bo-Peeps.

“For ‘*demain*, ’” Virgil began to sing  
 with a rowley-powley gammon,  
 “read ‘*de Main*.’ For ‘firse’ read ‘frise.’[”] (2001: 474)

The Paris restaurant welcomes all at once Creusa, the speaker’s father and Virgil, who begins to sing the tune of “Waltzing Mathilda.” His song is a series of metamorphoses of apparently random words into their close correlatives. Thus Virgil amplifies his role as the poem’s Tiresias, as his incantatory song of change redeploys the method used earlier in *Hay*, particularly in “Errata.” While his song is implied to have been heard throughout the volume, now Virgil gets to sing to the full assembly, with more and more characters appearing alongside the Muldoons and Creusa. However, whereas Tiresias “sees the substance of the poem,” as Eliot would have us believe (2002: 72), Virgil knows only the haphazard song of contingent change that is open enough to accommodate the variety that he beholds. The French restaurant, which in *The Prince of the Quotidian* Muldoon called “café du monde” (1994: 26), becomes the site of an experience of that incorrigible plurality Louis MacNeice celebrates and Muldoon seeks to embody in all its radicalness.

The ending of “The Bangle (Slight Return)” again evokes the malleability of language in Virgil’s song: “For ‘Menalaus’ read ‘Menelaus.’ / For ‘dinkum’ read ‘dink.’ / For ‘Wooroonoran,’ my darlings, read ‘Wirra Wirra’” (2001: 476). This suggests as much a transition as an equation so that either side retains its distinctiveness while it opens itself to similarity within the boundaries of the poetic that Virgil espouses. In effect, the experiences of the privileged speaker, his “da,” Creusa, Aeneas and the “blood-brilliant” Greeks are no longer juxtaposed but rather deemed interchangeable; even if in the poem, they are never introduced to each other, they are shown to be occupying the same position within the textual space that is characterised by radical polymorphism of Virgil’s song. It is his celebration of language’s metamorphosis that creates an empathic intervention in the encounters between individuals, who need follow no pre-existent ethical formula. In the final part, the image of the congregation convened by Virgil suggests intimacy and a shared perspective. Crucially, the light-hearted tone of the poem and the levity with which the poet plays with the words’ changeability are offset by the seriousness of the narratives of death, destruction and deprivation. Thus what stages the titular, parenthetical “slight return” at the end of the poem as well as the entire volume is the coupling of the poet’s error-loving playfulness and the gravity of the events on which he focuses. As he works through the mythical scheme of references, Muldoon shows that error and linguistic contamination are hallmarks of a migrant sensibility that can only be sung in a protean language which, for all this trifling, speaks responsibly of matters of life and death.

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