

# Translation as Appropriation in the Work of Paul Muldoon

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## *Abstract*

A translated poem is always a new original. If its rewriting of the thought-content, imagery, emotions and formal structure of its model differs considerably from what a literal translation might yield—as may be the case when the translator happens to be a poet with a marked aesthetic or thematic agenda—it may even be called an appropriation. It is my contention that this phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the work of Paul Muldoon. In this article I discuss Muldoon's practice as a translator and his use of translations in his original collections, in particular the way translations affect and are affected by their new context, while also relating his habits as a translator to his theoretical discussions of the nature of translation.

Keywords: Translation; appropriation; rewriting; original

Translation has played a prominent role in Northern Irish poetry during the last 50 years. Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson have all in different ways made translation an important part of their output and have all to a large extent tapped the same sources: Irish classics, Latin and Greek classics, and European classics such as *Beowulf* (Heaney) and Dante (Carson). Some of them (Mahon, Carson and Muldoon) have also taken a marked interest in European High Modernism and its French Symbolist precursors.

In this article I contend that Paul Muldoon differs from his coevals in the consistent use he has made of translation in his own original collections. To appreciate what this means we should first of all remember, as André Lefevere has insisted, that every translation is a rewriting, characterized by a different set of constraints and aims from that of the original (1992). A translation, then, is a new original, produced in a new context and spoken in a different voice. When the translator is an author with a strong voice of his or her own, the translation is likely to take on some of the inflections and concerns found in the original texts written by the author/translator. This is true of the translations of the Irish poets mentioned above; it is true of those of

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Muldoon's translations formally identified as such: two volumes of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's work and Aristophanes' *The birds*.

As is well known, Muldoon's collections, of which there are now 13, are carefully crafted compositional entities. A translation displaying the same linguistic and formal characteristics as his original work and moreover forming part of a thematically complex sequence would seem to aspire to a different ontological status from that of a run-of-the-mill translation. Spoken in the translator's voice, it may also allow, through its foreign origin, an importation of emotions and experiences that go beyond the confines of the poet/translator's original work: it affects and is affected by its new context.

In this article I contend that many of the translations found in Muldoon's original collections perform such a function. I examine what forms Muldoon's translations and appropriations take, relating them to the contexts and expectations created by his original poems. To give an idea of the development and range of his work as a translator, I proceed chronologically, discussing his own writings on translation in relation to the particular moment in his career when they were written and published.

Naturally, Muldoon's work as a translator has not gone unnoticed though its particular expressions have not attracted much special attention. Michael Cronin (1996) and Kathleen Shields (2000) make some comments in passing. Tim Kendall (1996), Clair Wills (1998), Jefferson Holdridge (2008), Anne Karhio (2016) and Ruben Moi (2020), who have all written monographs on his work, have comparatively little to say about translation. John Kerrigan, in his essay on 'Ulster Ovids' (1992) makes some acute comments on Muldoon's use of Ovid. The only study to provide a sustained discussion of Muldoon and translation is that of Rui Carvalho Homem, who devotes a well-researched and insightful chapter to Muldoon in his book on poetry and translation in Northern Ireland. Homem observes a tension in Muldoon's work between adherence to a received poetics (and perception of the poet's role in Irish society) and irreverent dismissal of this poetics; similarly, he perceives a tension in Muldoon between a New Critical and a postmodernist stance. I will address this tension in so far as it affects his translations.

The first instance of Muldoon's use of translation in his original work is 'Immram', the concluding long poem of his third collection *Why Brownlee left* (1980). The basis for this 30-stanza poem is hinted at in one of the acknowledgements of the first edition of *Why Brownlee left*: 'I am indebted to Whitley Stokes's translation of 'Immram Mael Duin' (*Revue Celtique* IX-X)' (1980: 48).

An *immram* ('travel tale'; plural *immrama*) is a genre in medieval Irish literature, telling the story of a young man who sets out on a sea journey to the Otherworld. In *Immram Mael Duin*, which dates from the 10th century, the hero's aim is to seek to revenge on his father's killer. This leads him to visit a long series of strange islands before he returns to the one he started out from. Several of the incidents recounted in *Immram Mael Duin* parallel pagan adventure stories, but the poem as a whole has a Christian outlook, noticeable in many of the episodes, and particularly in the closing section: on the last island that he visits, Mael Duin meets a monk who advises him not to seek revenge. When he arrives home, he finally meets his father's killer and makes peace with him.

Clearly 'Immram' is not a translation in any ordinary sense of the word: a comparison with the Irish text shows immediately that it is not a word-by-word (or even a section-by-section) rendition of the original. Moreover, while *Immram Mael Duin* is a straightforward, fairly laconic account of the adventures of Mael Duin and his companions, Muldoon's poem, composed in eight-line stanzas, is a linguistic tour de force. Set in Los Angeles, narrated in the hardboiled manner of Raymond Chandler and full of humorous similes and metaphors, it tells the story of a son who has to find out what has happened to his father by exploring the seedy underworld of drug kings and prostitutes. Nevertheless, a reader who has read Muldoon's note cannot fail to be struck by certain similarities between the two texts. Like Mael Duin who returns to the island from which he set out, 'Immram's' hero ends up where he started: in Foster's pool-hall (a place with existential connotations, given the word's association with 'gene-pool'). Both poems end on a note of forgiveness; in 'Immram', though, the son is forgiven in lieu of his father who has turned out to be a 'mule', a person who carries drugs for a trafficker, and who has evidently tried to escape with undelivered goods. Other passages in 'Immram' recall episodes in *Immram Mael Duin*. The black billiard-player who makes insinuations about the hero's parentage

in stanza 1 has a counterpart in the envious warrior who queries Mael Duin in a similar manner at the outset of his tale. Like Mael Duin who finds out about his father's true identity from his mother (a nun), the protagonist of 'Immram' learns about his father's identity from his mother, a drug addict undergoing treatment in an establishment called 'Paradise'.

All these parallels provide Muldoon's narrative with a subtext that lends an existential edge to the seemingly insouciant tone of the hero's account of his adventures while adding to the collection's concern with disappearances and retribution. These features recall the 'mythic method' T. S. Eliot discovered in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This is a device Muldoon employs in the concluding long poem of his first collection, *New Weather* (1973). This piece, called 'The Year of the Sloes, to Ishi', was inspired by the life and fate of the last surviving member of the Native American Yahi tribe but was also a response to the events of Bloody Sunday 1972. Though this parallelism is not apparent from the poem itself, it can be seen as an anticipation of the technique employed in 'Immram'. The thematic meaning of 'Immram' is also enhanced by the poem's interrelations with other poems in *Why Brownlee left*, particularly the sonnet 'Immrama'. The speaker of 'Immrama' 'trail[s] his father's spirit' from his childhood home in a mud-walled cabin in Ireland to his present whereabouts as an emigrant in Brazil; the speaker imagines glimpsing him drinking rum '[w]ith a man who might be a Nazi' while his children lie asleep nearby 'under their mosquito-nets'. The immram motif here takes on a different character: the islands are represented by the different stations on the father's journey to South America, and there is a strong dissonance between the medieval source's emphasis on forgiveness and the sonnet's suggestion that the father is in danger of being perverted by associating with a possible Nazi. By contrast, 'Immram' ends on a more positive note, sending the speaker back to where he came from and hinting at the possibility of reconciliation.

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The techniques tried out in 'Immram' are put to new and more complex use in 'The more a man has the more a man wants', the concluding long poem of Muldoon's next collection, *Quoof* (1983). According to the

blurb, this poem is ‘loosely based’ on the Winnebago Trickster Cycle, presumably as printed by Paul Radin in his well-known 1956 volume, *The Trickster*.<sup>1</sup> The Trickster cycle consists of 49 prose episodes setting forth Trickster’s exploits on earth before being admitted to Heaven. Muldoon’s sequence consists of 49 fourteen-line poems, which tell a complicated story about an IRA terrorist pursued by a Sioux who wants to revenge himself on the IRA man because one of his relatives took part in the massacre at Wounded Knee.

A number of episodes in the Trickster cycle have clear points of contact with passages in Muldoon’s poem. In episode 1 Trickster plans to go on the warpath although he is cohabiting with a woman; in Muldoon’s first stanza Gallogly, the protagonist, has to leave a girlfriend as the police close in on him. In stanza 11, Gallogly ‘seizes his own wrist / as if, as if / Blind Pew again seized Jim / ... / As if Jim Hawkins led Blind Pew / to Billy Bones and they were all one and the same’, behaviour paralleling episode 5 in the Trickster cycle where Trickster’s left arm grabs a buffalo but is threatened by his right arm, which wants its share, and is forced to release its hold; a moment later the left arm seizes the right arm’s wrist, and a vicious fight ensues which leaves the left arm badly cut up and bleeding profusely. The episode seems to be a metaphorical way of representing Trickster’s internal drives while in Muldoon’s stanza 11 the narrator’s childhood memories of *Treasure Island* are superimposed on the protagonist’s internal battle, leaving him to ‘stare in disbelief / at an aspirin-white spot he pressed / into his own palm’. The white spot recalls sonnet two’s pebble of quartz which Gallogly’s pursuer, a Sioux named Mangas Jones, carries in his powder-blue attaché-case and has to declare when passing Customs. The pebble of quartz is an import from a poem by Robert Frost (1995: 208) where it is a metaphor for the elusiveness of identity. Thus, a burlesque episode in the Trickster cycle is re-used in Muldoon’s sonnet as a narrative matrix but endowed with complex additional associations.

A similar procedure is adopted in Muldoon’s stanza 18 where Gallogly engages in outrageous sexual behaviour while ‘out to lunch’: ‘When his cock rattles his sabre / he takes it in his dab / hand, plants one

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<sup>1</sup> Radin’s text is a revised version of a translation into English of an original text ‘written down in the Winnebago syllabary’ by a Winnebago as narrated to him by another Winnebago ‘under proper conditions’ (1956: 111-12).

chaste kiss / on its forelock, / and then, with a birl and skirl, / tosses it off like a caber.' Gallogly's eccentric behaviour recalls episode 16 in the Trickster cycle where Trickster, who keeps his penis in a box, makes three attempts to send it sliding across a lake so that he might have intercourse with the chief's daughter; the fourth time round he is successful. The peculiar mixture of playfulness and violence characteristic of the Trickster cycle is accentuated in Muldoon's stanza where the original's obscenities are transformed into surreal *doubles entendres* evocative both of old-fashioned military gallantry and Gaelic sport.

As Radin points out, Trickster is both 'creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is duped himself ... He possesses no values ... yet through his actions all values come into being' (1956: ix). Despite his amoral nature, Trickster is apotheosized; in the 49th and final episode, he dies and enters Heaven. Muldoon's two protagonists both seem to embody Trickster's metamorphic, amoral nature, but there is nothing grand about them. When one of them (or possibly both) dies in an explosion in the final sonnet all that is left is a luminous stone held by a hairy hand, presumably the pebble of quartz connected with the search for identity. Thus, while Trickster, despite his duplicity, is at home in his world, the bewildering universe of Muldoon's poem is unfathomable: just as the 49 sonnets cover a variety of linguistic registers, ranging from dialectal Northern Irish English through journalese to high-standard literary English, so the different perspectives and responses evoked in Muldoon's sonnets project a world with no convictions, no shared values and no sense of identity. It is no surprise that the final word is merely a grunt ('Huh') uttered by one of the two speakers contemplating the luminous stone at the end.

Despite the fragmentariness of the 49 stanzas some lines seem to evoke a stable world-view. Thus, the motif of the cut-off hand looks back to a sonnet which occurs earlier in *Quoof* (1983: 14) and is translated 'from the German of Erich Arendt'—translated, it should be added, in a straightforward way which keeps the rhymes and stays close to the literal meaning of the original. The cut-off hands in Arendt's sonnet belong to a farmer killed by the Guardia Civil during the Spanish civil war. The poem strikes a note of pathos unusual in Muldoon's own poems—'at

night ... the villagers heard / the fists come blattering<sup>2</sup> on their windows, looking for home’—and though the cut-off hands also evoke the Red Hand of Ulster they convey a justified humanitarian protest into the violent, humorous and deeply amoral world of ‘The more a man has’.

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Among the wealth of ‘found’ material in ‘The more a man has’ is sonnet 21 in which Ovid’s ‘conspicuously tongue-in-cheek / account of an eyeball / to eyeball / encounter’ between Leto and Lycian reed-cutters is highlighted by the poem’s anonymous narrator. The reed-cutters, who have muddied the clean water Leto wants to drink, have been transformed into frogs remarkably content with living in a similarly turbid pond themselves. Some ten years later, Muldoon translated the passage in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* where this episode occurs, printing it as the first poem in *The annals of Chile* (1994) under the title ‘Ovid: *Metamorphoses*. Book VI, Lines 313-81’. This particular kind of title is the first example of a format that keeps recurring in Muldoon’s later collections. It first appears in ekphrastic poems such as ‘Mary Farl Powers: *Pink spotted torso*’ and ‘Edward Kienholz: *The state hospital*’ (both from *Quoof*).<sup>3</sup> The factual nature of the titles is in stark contrast with the emotionally laden content of the poems, which comes as an elaboration of the artwork (Kienholz) or as a biographical fantasy (Powers) inspired by the introductory description of the artwork’s physical coming-into-being. This distance between title and poem is worth bearing in mind as we turn to the similarly titled translations of which ‘Ovid: *Metamorphoses*’ is the first. It suggests that what we are about to read is not so much a translation of an original as an original

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Blatter’ is a Scots word, meaning ‘rattle, beat with violence’; see *Concise Ulster dictionary* (1996), s.v. *blatter*.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the two ekphrases, printed next to each other, are followed by the translation of the Arendt poem and another poem about a terrifying family memory. Though the translation’s title does not make use of the format adopted in later translations—it is merely stated that the poem is ‘after the German of Erich Arendt’—it is clear that the appearance of the translation is thematically motivated; the Arendt poem has been appropriated because of its affinity with *Quoof*’s other poems and because it adds an important voice to the collection’s other voices.

poem—an appropriation—prompted by the speaker’s familiarity with the original.

Assigning such a prominent position to a translation also suggests that it carries weight. While in ‘The more a man has’ Muldoon compounds his rewriting of Ovid by having the reed-cutters ‘bubble’ and ‘squeak’ and ‘plonk’ in ‘their icy jissom’ here he does not depart radically ‘in prosody and diction, from the expectations defined by contemporary (academic) versions of Classical texts’ (Homem 2009: 155). On the contrary, the translation is notable for its fluency and restrained handling of Leto’s predicament. Thus, *The annals of Chile* opens on a note of slighted gentleness: a fleeing goddess who has just become a mother is treated unmercifully. The compassion voiced in this poem contrasts with the next few poems which highlight the speaker’s complex relationship with his mother and father; then, after the great lament for the deceased Mary Farl Powers in ‘Incantata’, the theme of parenthood is resumed in a set of happy, not to say ecstatic poems about the birth of the speaker’s daughter. This mood is, in its turn, momentarily interrupted by another translation, ‘César Vallejo: Testimony’. That poem’s original title (‘Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca’, ‘Black stone on a white stone’) refers to the habit of memorializing a fortunate event with a white stone, an unfortunate event with a black stone (Florit 1960: 24). While the mood of the original is ambiguous, Muldoon’s translation has a tragi-comical tone, effected by several lines being characterised by a calculated prosiness (‘I try not to take this too much to heart’) which is at odds with the poem’s—and above all the original’s—general seriousness. A similar effect is obtained when the original’s overuse of the word ‘camino’ (‘road’) is critiqued by a bathetic final phrase in English: ‘by the aforementioned roads’.

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In 1993, Muldoon published the first of two volumes containing translations of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s work (the second appeared in 2007). In both cases, his role as translator was emphasised. The front covers not only state the name of the translator in large letters: on the spine the names of the original author and the translator are printed next to each other as though they were collaborators, equally responsible for the result. This is in fact not wide of the mark since Muldoon is known to



have worked from a crib prepared for him by Ní Dhomhnaill (Falci, 340). Clearly, it makes sense for the publishers to stress that these translations of Ní Dhomhnaill carry added value by being made by one of the most prominent poets in the English-speaking world. Another inference is that the reader of these volumes can expect not only to encounter the work of a poet who writes in a language that is inaccessible to most of them but poems that enrich and enlarge the oeuvre of the poet responsible for the translation.

To what extent, then, are these expectations met? Falci, who notes that Ní Dhomhnaill's work 'switch[es] between classical Irish literary registers, modern or traditional Irish vernacular, and newer idioms in Irish', reflecting an attempt to introduce modern American and European modes of writing into Irish (2012: 340), finds some of Muldoon's translations surprisingly literal and occasionally quite close to the cribs provided by Ní Dhomhnaill. But there are also passages where Muldoon excels in what Falci refers to as 'doing' Muldoon: a single line may be expanded into two, rhymes are imposed on poems that do not rhyme in Irish, new stanzaic patterns are adopted and use is made of exuberant word-play. One of the most striking of these occurs in a line that has given the first collection its name. In a poem on a banshee, Dora Dooley, a merely 'green cloak' (chlóca uaithne) is transformed by Muldoon into an 'astrakhan cloak' (1993: 47), a noun suggesting both a colour and another Irish word, 'aistriúchán', which means 'translation', relevant in this context because it is Dora Dooley's trade to 'translate' reality by her keening just as it is Muldoon's job to translate the poem. Another intricate example is the rendition of 'an capall coille' as 'the acrostical capercaillie' (1993: 67). This addition refers to an acrostical poem in Muldoon's *Madoc*, 'Capercaillies' (1990: 6). And in 'An traein dubh', 'The black train', to quote a final example, the placenames Dachau or Belsen are added in a line that does not occur in the original (1993: 31). Justin Quinn considers that Muldoon's mode of translation in this latter poem 'display[s] an impatience and lack of interest in the original' and that this is unsurprising 'as [he] is a far superior poet' (2008: 150). However, as Muldoon has become Ní Dhomhnaill's main translator with two volumes to his credit it seems probable that he considers her work well worth translating, especially as the vast majority of the other poets he has chosen to translate are some of the most revered names of the modernist tradition. It seems more pertinent to observe that to a

surprising degree he stays close to the original and that such deviations as occur should be seen, as Falci does, as ‘imbed[ding] a critique’ aimed both at the poem translated and at the activities in which Muldoon is engaged as a translator (2012: 336). The playfulness that they evince is an aspect of the two poets’ collaboration, and it might even be argued that Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem offers Muldoon an opportunity to make a more direct political statement than customary, at this time, in his original work.

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Muldoon’s translation of Aristophanes’ *The birds* was commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania Press for the Penn Greek Drama Series. It was published in 1999 in the US by Penn University Press as part of a volume entitled *Aristophanes 3* (along with translations of two other plays) and separately in Ireland by The Gallery Press. The blurb of the Irish edition claims that the original play is ‘an uncanny precursor of Beckett’ while its subject matter is ‘troubles which ... resonate with contemporary significance’. The front cover presents *The birds* as a work by Paul Muldoon ‘with Richard Martin’ while leaving out the name of Aristophanes.<sup>4</sup>

Martin was at the time a classicist colleague of Muldoon’s at Princeton but what form the collaboration took is not specified. A comparison of Muldoon’s text with the Greek original shows that, despite a number of expected idiosyncratic deviations, the translation is based on close familiarity with the play’s literal meaning; only occasionally has the English text been domesticated for the reader’s benefit:<sup>5</sup> there are no annotations, no wordlist nor indeed any other clarifications of puzzling or unfamiliar material.

Clearly, the translation, despite its American provenance, is geared to a readership familiar with Muldoon’s Northern Irish colloquialisms and references to recent Northern Irish history. However, Muldoon also

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<sup>4</sup> The title-page states that the play was ‘translated from Aristophanes by Paul Muldoon with Richard Martin’. The spine reads: ‘Paul Muldoon THE BIRDS (*after Aristophanes*)’.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, Hieron, the cultured tyrant of Syracuse, is mentioned by name in Muldoon’s version (1999) while the original alludes to him without naming his name.

retains many topical pointers to Athenian society and history, some of them self-explanatory, others not. Some of the generic *dramatis personae* such as priest, poet, and tax collector have been domesticated, usually by means of neologisms—we encounter, for example, a ‘merganservant’, an ‘ombirdsman’, a ‘birdnik’ and ‘Queen Maybe’ (recalling Queen Maedbh). Thus, we find ourselves in the unusual situation of listening to seemingly present-day characters referring as a matter of course to events or phenomena in an ancient Greek context—or to ancient Athenians conversant with recent phenomena in Northern Ireland. This type of time-switching and cultural fusion is familiar from high modernist texts but also from Muldoon’s earlier work, from ‘Immram’ through ‘The more a man has’ to the title poem of *Madoc: a mystery*. Technically, then, Muldoon’s *Birds* is similar in kind to high modernist translations such as Ezra Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* where similar cultural double exposures occur. It is not surprising that the Bard, drawing on Pound’s well-known dictum, considers the founding of Nebulbulfast ‘news that will stay news’ (1999: 45).<sup>6</sup>

Homem also draws attention to its self-referential nature, identifying two of the characters (‘The Bard’ and ‘Kinesias’) as impersonations of Muldoon’s colleagues Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney (2009: 160). Homem’s list can in fact be extended. The ‘Supergrouse’ (replacing Aristophanes’ ‘sykophantés’, ‘an informer’) introduces himself in terms that recall Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ (1995: 207): ‘What bird this is I think I know’ (1999: 65; cf. Frost’s ‘Whose woods these are I think I know’);<sup>7</sup> the effect is a gently satirical one. Nor does Muldoon spare himself: when the ‘Bard’ promises to write poetry about Nebulbulfast he addresses it as ‘a city of golden thrones / and freezing rains. I know in my bones / I have come to the city of the snowy plains’, lines that recall two well-known lines in Muldoon’s ‘Wind and tree’: ‘Yet by my bones / I tell new weather’;<sup>8</sup> and

<sup>6</sup> The original reads: ‘*Nephelokokkugían tàn evdaímona klêson, o Moûsa, teais en húmnon aoidais*’ (‘Cloudcuckooland the Blest now celebrate, O Muse, in your hymns of song’), *Birds* 904–6.

<sup>7</sup> The original passage runs: ‘*órnithes tines hoid’ oudèn échontes pteropoíkiloí*’ (‘Who are these birds, these have-nots with dappled wings?’), *Birds*, 1410–11.

<sup>8</sup> The original has: ‘*Klêson, o chrysóthronē, tàn tromerán, kruerán; niphóbola pedía polútropá t’ éluthon*’ (‘Celebrate, O Muse on golden throne, the shivering,

in an enumeration of different species of birds he mentions ‘the famous Capercaillie’ where the original talks about a pheasant (1999: 44; *The birds* 884).

Is Muldoon’s *Birds* a political statement? Published in July 1999, it appeared at a moment when the ceasefire in Northern Ireland had been in effect for five years. As is well known, it had been hailed by Heaney in a second Tollund poem (1995: 69) and by Longley in a famous sonnet, a rewriting of a well-known scene in the *Iliad* (1995: 39). Previously, Heaney had published a ‘version’ of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* under the title *The cure at Troy* in which he particularly addressed the ways ‘in which the victim of injustice can become as devoted to the contemplation of their wounds as the perpetrators are to the justification of their system’, as the blurb of the American edition has it (1995). Later (2004), he was to publish a translation of *Antigone*, called *The burial at Thebes*, one of a fairly large number of translations of *Antigone* published in Northern Ireland during the Troubles; incidentally, one of them is by Tom Paulin, to whom Muldoon’s *Birds* is dedicated.

It is in the context of this boom for ancient drama as a vehicle for commenting indirectly on political and societal topics in Northern Ireland that *The birds* should be seen. Still, even though *The birds* is ostensibly about the creation of a new state and overthrowing the powers that be, an irreverent comedy of this kind cannot, in terms of its moral import, measure up to a play like *Antigone*. Though *The birds* was written and produced in 414 BC, at a point when Athens had sent a military expedition to Sicily and was hoping to extend her empire, Aristophanes’ *Birds* is not an overtly political play but rather a satirical review of types in Athenian society and a scathing examination of the ills of society. Similarly, although Muldoon’s translation follows Aristophanes’ original and appoints Peisetairos, who has fled his hometown to avoid a law-suit, become ruler of Nebulbulfast and marry Queen Maybe, the focus of his translation is not on the ending and its possible contemporary relevance but on the many obstacles that crop up underway and have forced Peisetairos and his friend to escape from Athens in the first place. The very name of this new state in the air suggests that its future is nebulous while its affinity with Belfast is made

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freezing land; to the snowblown many-pathed plains have I come’), *Birds*, 950–51.

clear through a number of references to Belfast's history and traditions; we learn, for example, that the new city in the air is full of noise that makes it sound 'like a shipyard', a detail that of course has no counterpart in the original Greek.

What must have appealed to Muldoon is the opportunity to ventriloquize a writer famous precisely for his irreverence and contrariness—characteristics associated with Muldoon himself—and to do so by making use of techniques employed in earlier works. His satire is not exclusively directed at Belfast and Northern Ireland, however. A number of his most memorable transformations of the original text aim at international rather than Northern Irish phenomena: the 'ombirdsman' and the 'birdnik' are two cases in point as are the suggestions that corrupt politicians have bank accounts and connections elsewhere; the 'UN' of the play is short for 'United Nebulbulfasts' (1999: 50-51). The poets satirised may be Irish celebrities but the social ills are both Irish and global.

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All Muldoon's critics agree that his starting point as a poet is a late high modernist stance with roots in Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett. They also agree that, unlike Heaney, he eschews clear political statements, preferring to address social matters in a tangential or ambiguous manner. Such reticence has been described by some as an aspect of his postmodernism while others see it as an expression of innate tensions in Irish society and an aspect of his poetic personality rather than immersion in theory. What is less often said is that Muldoon is a poet, not a theorist or explicator, and so can allow himself to make statements pointing in either direction.

This came to a head at the turn of the last century when Muldoon gave two sets of lectures at Oxford over a period of six years. Homem, who devotes a large part of his chapter to defining Muldoon's theoretical outlook, draws attention to his affinity with New Criticism, demonstrated in his 1998 Bateson lecture in which he dismisses Barthes' 'father-author' and Derrida's 'phallogocentrism' (1998: 120). On the other hand, his espousal of notions such as 'promiscuous provenance' and 'essential liminality' in *To Ireland, I*—his Clarendon Lectures—seems to strengthen his postmodernist credentials (2000: 5) though he sees these conditions as 'central to the Irish psyche' (2000: 8). While many critics,

Moi most vigorously, cherish the view that Muldoon is a fully paid-up postmodernist, Homem's hesitation to place him unequivocally in only one camp seems to me a sensible one. It would be strange indeed if he, having spent so much time at universities, had not in some way absorbed and played with postmodernist theory,<sup>9</sup> particularly if it served his poetic purposes.

Interestingly, in three of the lectures he gave as Professor of Poetry at Oxford Muldoon discusses translation apropos of poems by Eugenio Montale, Fernando Pessoa, and Marina Tsvetayeva (2006). In each case he discusses what the translations do, in what ways and how well they convey 'the end' of the poem. On different occasions, he makes reference to authorities who have voiced views on the art of translation: Octavio Paz and Walter Benjamin, whose essay on 'The task of the translator' he refers to twice. It is apparent that Muldoon approaches translation issues from the point of view of an active translator and writer. Both Benjamin and Paz figure in surveys such as those of George Steiner (1975), Lawrence Venuti (2004), and Susan Bassnett (2014), but it is probably fair to say that their contributions to Translation Studies are less rigorous than those of academics such as Bassnett, Lefevere or Venuti.

In his lecture on Montale's 'L'anguilla' / 'The eel', Muldoon discusses a poem's (and translation's) genesis and ontological status, proposing

(1) that the 'poetic translation' is itself an 'original poem', (2) that the 'original' poem on which it's based is itself a 'translation' and (3) that both 'original poem' and 'poetic translation' are manifestations of some ur-poem (2006: 195)

The notion that a translated poem is an original poem is one that Muldoon shares with Octavio Paz, whom he quotes to this effect (2006: 202), and no doubt many others. The other ideas also have counterparts in Paz who, however, refers somewhat more prosaically to an original as a translation from 'the nonverbal world'. Without going into the specifics of the poem's prenatal existence we might observe that this shared

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<sup>9</sup> In his elegy for Ciaran Carson, 'The triumph' (2020), clearly in large portions autobiographical, the two friends are represented both as attending a lecture by F.R. Leavis and immersing themselves in Barthes.

experience of the poem's coming-into-being inspires Muldoon in his discussion of 'L'anguilla' and its English-language afterlife to describe, in labyrinthine detail, how he attends to lexical meanings, sound effects, and intertextual echoes in his capacity as the poem's 'stunt-reader' (and 'stunt-writer'). He concludes his discussion with a quotation from Benjamin's 'The task of the translator':

no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. (2006: 220)

In tracing the English-language afterlife of 'L'anguilla', as evidenced by Robert Lowell's translation of Montale and Heaney's reading of Lowell, Muldoon voices some of the tenets of Translation Studies, in particular André Lefevere's insistence that a translation is a rewriting for a new set of readers in another language with different expectations and an agenda of their own. Such a view is postmodernist in the sense that it accepts that the original is indeterminate and subject to the reader's interpretation: if the reader is also a translator, that interpretation is projected on to the translation. I would add that if the translator is also a poet the translation is likely to form part of his or her oeuvre.

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Aristophanes and Ovid (as translated by Swinburne and Dryden) are, together with Homer, the only three ancient contributors to *The Faber book of beasts*, the anthology Muldoon edited in 1997. His own poetic bestiary was extended by three translations in his next volume, *Hay* (1998): two poems by Rilke (*The unicorn* and *Black cat*) and an anonymous medieval Irish poem about a white cat, 'Pangur Ban', which many Irish poets have tried their hand at.<sup>10</sup> As Homem notes, Muldoon's version 'acknowledges features of the translator's writerly persona', slyly suggesting his need for authorial control: 'much as Pangur goes

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<sup>10</sup> As one of them, Seamus Heaney, explains, they do so 'not in order to outdo the previous versions, but simply to get a more exact and intimate grip on the canonical goods' (quoted from Heaney's note in *Poetry Magazine*, 188: 1 (April 2006), 9).

after mice / I go hunting for the precise / word', a line that Homem thinks works against Muldoon's alleged postmodernist bent (2009: 155-156).

Muldoon's next volume, *Moy sand and gravel* (2002), appeared while he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Hence, it comes as no big surprise that one of the poems bears the title 'Eugenio Montale: *The eel*'. It is worth noting, though, that Montale's poem, which ostensibly traces an eel's voyage from the Baltic to the Romagna, is really a love poem. In the first half of the poem, the eel's efforts to overcome the obstacles on its way are scrutinized in some detail while in the second half the poet's account of the eel's journey is couched in increasingly anthropomorphic terms until, a few lines before the ending, it becomes clear that the speaker is really addressing a woman, who in the last line of the poem is asked if she cannot see that the eel is her sister ('puoi / tu non crederla sorella?').

In speaking of his poem, Montale has used the term 'religious penetration of the world' and its thirty lines, forming one single sentence, have an almost hymn-like character. In translation, the poem brings a triumphant quality to Muldoon's collection with few counterparts, if any, in his work. To appreciate its full impact it is helpful also to note where it occurs in the collection. It is preceded by a poem which is in fact a translation, too: 'Horace: two odes'. The first of these (*Odes* I xv) is also about a sea voyage, but a more fateful one: that of Paris and Helen to Troy. The speaker, Nereus, warns Paris of the dangers that threaten him, using a phrase—'Can't you make out Ulysses, sworn enemy of your people, at your back?'—that recalls the last line of Muldoon's Montale translation: 'can't you take in / her being your next-of-kin?' The poem that occurs after the Montale poem ('When Aifric and I put in at that little creek') is also about a fateful sea voyage undertaken, it would seem, by two lovers. Simply by placing his Montale poem between two poems about catastrophic sea voyages Muldoon emphasizes its blissful character.

However, while the Montale poem's general character is retained, Muldoon's translation renders its diction more colloquial at some points. The most striking of these is the ending. Transforming the last two lines to a rhyming couplet and replacing 'sorella' with 'next-of-kin', he achieves 'a quasi-parodic ring' (Homem 2009: 153). Other alterations of the original in this direction have a clear but less prominent effect. 'Shrugging off' the Baltic and 'hang[ing] out in our seas' suggests that



‘the siren of icy waters’ is amenable to camaraderie and reinforces the element of anthropomorphism introduced by the description of the eel as a ‘siren’. Replacing the reference to the ‘eel’ in lines 1 and 16 (which divides the original in two strophic parts) with ‘The self-same’ and ‘that self-same eel’ respectively serves two ends: it strikes a more intimate note from the very beginning, and it makes for a more emphatic start, comparable to that of the Italian original, than the monosyllable ‘eel’ would; it also illustrates Muldoon’s observation in his lecture on the effect of the reiteration of the phrase (‘as if the poem were steadying itself, asserting its focus’ [2006: 207]). The most striking example of Muldoon’s handling of the solemn lyricism of the original is his rendition of Montale’s ‘paradisi di fecondazione’ as ‘some green and pleasant spawning ground’, evocative of Blake’s ambition to ‘build Jerusalem / in England’s green and pleasant land’. While Montale’s original has Dantean overtones, Muldoon’s poem—lacking both paradise and Jerusalem—has a homely, almost parodic ring to it.

At the same time, Muldoon takes care to retain the easy rhetorical flow of the original, its ‘formal mimicry of the eel’s meandering course’ (2009: 152-153). The original is full of double *l*-sounds—*scintilla*, *gemella*, *brillare*, *sorella*, and of course *Anguilla*—and Muldoon’s fondness for alliteration yields several results: ‘dips and darts’, ‘scouting and scanning’, ‘drought and desolation’. Finally, his elaboration of certain phrases and occasional additions (such as ‘bed-hugger’) not only render the lines longer in English than in Italian but contribute to their slow and majestic rhythm.

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In addition to these three volumes Muldoon has published a pamphlet, *When the pie was opened* (2008), which forms part of a series issued by the Center for Writers & Translators at the American University of Paris. The aim of the series ‘is to make available new explorations in writing, in translating, and in the areas linking these two activities’.<sup>11</sup> To this end, Muldoon has put together a collection of nine poems, four original poems by himself, and five translations from Latin, Old English, Irish, Medieval Welsh, and Modern Greek. While all of Muldoon’s original

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<sup>11</sup> The goal of the series is stated on the flap side of the back cover.

poems found their way into his next collection, *Maggot* (2010), none of the translations did. However, in the context of *When the pie was opened*, the poems and the translations can be seen to cooperate to create links and even form a structure that throws light on the ways in which original poems and translations function in Muldoon's major collections. The volume thus clearly joins the two activities of writing and translating, activating the more general meaning of translating: 'to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place, or condition, to another' (*OED*, s.v. *translate* I. 1. a.).

The nature of this enterprise is suggested by the form of the preface. The poems' interrelations 'are presented by Muldoon in his preface through the rather loose process of verbal and conceptual association that he often tantalisingly suggests is a basis for his poetics' (Homem 2009: 133). What Homem is getting at is presumably the way in which a word, idea or theme mentioned by Muldoon in one sentence is picked up in the next sentence or paragraph in a manner which is at once logical and haphazard. This principle is at work throughout Muldoon's preface, and the conclusion of the whole argument takes us back to the scene at the beginning where Muldoon describes what appears to be his introduction to the art of translation by Sean O'Baill, his Irish master at school. In other words, the preface does not only convey to us an idea of the poems' thematic linking but hints at the way the entire pamphlet centres on translation as a theme and activity; and, in the process, it indirectly draws attention to an important vehicle for Muldoon's poetics: the *corona* structure, illustrated in elaborate fashion by three of the four poems included: 'The windshield', 'Balls', and 'When the pie was opened' all end with the same line as they began while the last line of 'Quail', the fourth poem—a sonnet—repeats the geographical location mentioned in the second line, 'Antrim and Fermanagh'. This particular patterning is one that Muldoon has increasingly favoured in his later collections and has also transferred from its original context—a crown (or *corona*) of sonnets—to other structural designs. While, for example, his sequence 'The old country' (published in *Horse latitudes*, 2006) forms a regular crown of 13 sonnets, 'When the Pie Was Opened' consists of five sections in their turn each composed of three five-line stanzas.

In *When the pie was opened* the original poems serve as the pamphlet's beginning, middle, and end while the translated poems

constitute two chunks in between. In the list of contents the names of the authors and the titles of the poems are all given but as we turn to the actual poems we encounter a different set-up: the foreign poems are all printed in their original languages to the left and with Muldoon's translation to the right; in all cases, including Muldoon's original poems, the authors' names have been left out. This suggests that the reader is invited to listen to a conversation between voices from different times and places although there are thematic links as suggested in the preface. Though the translations are replete with the same idiolects and linguistic and formal mannerisms as one is wont to find in Muldoon's collections the overall effect is very much that of a conversation where different voices and experiences are heard. There is both similarity and difference at the same time, and we are made forcefully aware of Muldoon's presence as both author of original poems and translator, as both innovator and mediator.

In the preface, Muldoon mentions that he first became interested 'in the art of translation' when his Irish teacher 'encouraged [him] and [his] fellow students to submit for consideration by *The Irish Press* our renderings into English of Irish poems' (2008: 9). The experience, we learn, was 'transformative' since it instilled into him a sense that writing—and, we should perhaps add, translating—was 'among other thing, a job of journeywork'. Homem comments that the passage reveals that Muldoon 'first thought of becoming a writer because of a translation chore, and elects translation as an apt metaphor for this poetic awakening' (2009: 133). This may be true, though from Robert Potts' profile of the poet in the *Guardian* (21 May, 2001) we learn that Muldoon started to write poems at an early age and was in the habit of submitting poems instead of essays at school, and must have been a budding poet in English when his teacher wanted to recruit him as a translator; in fact, it may well have been because of Muldoon's interest in poetry that the suggestion was made. To complement Homem's point, I would like to draw attention to the phrase 'among other things': translating Irish poems, even classical ones, into English must also have made the poet-to-be aware that translation is an activity that involves putting one's identity at stake in various subtle and elusive ways, and some of these are in evidence in the pamphlet that Muldoon published so many years later.

It seems important to note that the colloquy enacted in *When the pie was opened* is one in which voices from different times—with different assumptions—are heard. At least three of the texts explore what Muldoon in his preface refers to as ‘the sexual life of a male’, ranging from ‘Ovid’s breezy account of an afternoon assignation to Dafydd ap Gwilym’s brassy address ... to his own member’ (2008: 10). These two poems convey an entirely different attitude to sex from the one encountered in Muldoon’s own poem, ‘Balls’, which digresses from a faint echo of Gwilym’s extravagant metaphors to a description of a predicament of an entirely different kind: a medical examination of a suspected testicular tumour. Muldoon being Muldoon, this leads on to reflections on, among other things, the etymological relations of *testis*, ‘witness’, and *testis*, ‘testicle’, conducted in the freely associative spirit discussed apropos of the preface. What makes this juxtaposition of texts interesting is not only the clash between different epochs’ way of talking about the male organ but the way in which Muldoon’s translations domesticate the originals. In Ovid’s case, the metre of the original—elegiac couplets—is replaced not by heroic couplets, as Christopher Marlowe did in his famous translation of the same poem (2007: 107), or rhymed iambic tetrameter, as Derek Mahon did in his version (‘Ovid in love’; 2006: 22). Instead, Muldoon offers a version in which every second line rhymes (A-B-A-B). Unlike Mahon, who leaves out some of the mythological imagery and makes the tryst more of an encounter of equals, Muldoon translates the poem *in toto*, keeps and even enhances the original’s ironic and self-centred attitude while making the diction more colloquial than the original’s and the narrator more of a cynical raconteur. It is difficult to see how a poem expressing such attitudes could make it into Muldoon’s own collections while the other two translations, of a well-known Irish song, ‘An Spailpín Fánach’, and a passage from Kostis Palamas’ *O Dodekálogos tou gúfou*, voice political stances ‘with a degree of explicitness that is pointedly absent from his poetry’ (Homem 2008: 158). This may have been true in 2008 but in his recent collections and in some very recent poems (2019a and 2020) Muldoon has made political statements which make it necessary to modify this view.

If translation is part and parcel of Muldoon's artistic expression and if it forms part of the same attempt at development and reinvention as his original poetry, then it is only to be expected that translation in his more recent work is assigned different forms than before and serves different purposes. Signs of such innovation can indeed be found in his most recent work.

The cover of the Faber and Faber edition of *Maggot*, Muldoon's eleventh collection, shows a photograph of a dead albatross with plastic junk in its stomach. The only translation in this book, titled 'Charles Baudelaire: "The albatross"', has a caption from the BBC:

About one third of all albatross chicks die on Midway, many as the result of being mistakenly fed plastic by their parents. Many albatrosses are found to have swallowed disposable cigarette lighters, which look remarkably like their staple food of squid.

Some of the technical characteristics observed in the Montale poem recur here. Numerous alliterations introduce a feature that has no counterpart in Baudelaire's arsenal of sonorous effects but emphasise the albatross' sad plight. Similarly, various colloquial expressions ('piddles along') and formulaic phrases ('ocean-going', applied to the bird) domesticate and render more ordinary Baudelaire's grand vision of the majestic if indolent bird (Baudelaire's 'indolents compagnons' is transformed into 'effortless motion'). An important detail is the introduction of 'we' in line 10: while Baudelaire's anonymous speaker is an observer who appears to be merely a witness to the bird's humiliation, Muldoon's speaker is actively involved in tormenting the albatross by forcing a clay-pipe into its beak (the original merely speaks of sailors teasing a bird with their pipes). In view of the BBC news item, this extra twist makes the poem take on a dire ecological dimension. At the same time Muldoon reinforces Baudelaire's identification of the bird with the poet by bringing in a reference to *Hamlet*: like the well-spoken prince, the albatross 'suffered the slings and arrows' of capricious fortune but 'exiled on dry land' he is helpless. Involving one of Baudelaire's best-known decadent poems in today's environmental discussion is indeed extending the use of translation.

Muldoon's twelfth collection, *One thousand things worth knowing*, contains three translations. 'Anonymous: from 'Marban and Guaire'' is a fairly straightforward rendition of a medieval Irish poem, voicing a

monk's pleasure in the riches of a simple, rural life, contentment denied his brother the king. This poem forms a strong contrast with the poem printed next in the collection. 'Federico García Lorca: "Death"' (from *Poet in New York*) is about 'the tremendous effort' living beings, animals as well as humans, put into trying to realise their imagined potential. While, for example, the horse 'does its damndest / to become a dog', the speaker, the only human in the poem, aims at being 'a blazing angel'. It is not difficult to see this poem about death as simultaneously a poem about creation—and life, too; apart from having a general thematic relevance to this collection about knowledge, it stands out, as a translation, by elaborating its own knowledge verbally. Lorca's laconic exclamations ('¡Qué esfuerzo!') are transformed into full, muscular sentences, making use of a vast repertory of synonyms which all have the ring of Muldoon and incorporate Lorca's sentiments in New York 1929/30 into a new poetic universe compiled in New York nearly a hundred years later. The third translation, 'Álvaro de Campos: "Belfast, 1922"' turns out to be a hoax. Álvaro de Campos, a ship engineer, was one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms. According to the biography Pessoa invented for him, he visited Barrow-in-Furness (mentioned in the poem) and Newcastle in 1922 but never, so far as Pessoa imagined, Belfast. This translation, then, is a translation without an original. Still, Muldoon makes use of de Campos' alleged love of machines, voicing sentiments that de Campos was supposed to have cherished. Again, the poem is linguistically pure Muldoon as the phrase 'The dun in *dunnock*' demonstrates.

It is possible of course that the de Campos poem should not be seen as a faked translation merely because its title resembles that of other translations. Other Muldoon poems with similar titles seem to suggest other alternatives just as some similarly titled ekphrastic poems seem to explode their ekphrastic character. 'Charles Emile Jacque: *Poultry among trees*' (2005: 14) is a case in point, starting out with an account of the poet's childhood before it finally lands in Jacque's painting. 'Wilfred Owen: November 4, 1918' and 'Edward Elgar: Cello concerto in E minor (1919)' strike out in new directions, dealing with Owen's state of mind on the day of his death and exploring Elgar's war experiences as reflected in his famous concerto respectively. In Muldoon's most recent volume, *Frolic and detour* (2019), two seemingly ekphrastic poems, 'Pablo Picasso: *Bottle of Bass and glass* (1914)' and 'Georges Braque:

*Still life with bottle of Bass* (1914)', turn out to be neither ekphrastic in a received sense, consisting as they do of an enumeration of artists who may have been drinking companions. They also stand out as their texts are identical while the titles of course are slightly different.

We are now approaching the translation paradox Jorge Luis Borges described in his famous short story about Pierre Menard who produced a version of *Don Quixote* that is identical to the original in terms of its wordings but, according to the narrator, different in its impact since it is written at another historical moment. Perhaps Muldoon has now reached the point which Edmund Spenser reached in 1595 when he 'translated' sonnet 35 to the position of sonnet 83 in *Amoretti*. Even if a translation were to be identical to its source in form it is different when we read it the second time round, as it occurs in a new context.

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