

1-1-2013

Going Into the Word-Hoard: The Writing Process, Language, and Its Implications In the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon

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GOING INTO THE WORD-HOARD: THE WRITING PROCESS,
LANGUAGE, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN THE POETRY OF MEDBH
MCGUCKIAN AND PAUL MULDOON

by

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Bachelors of Arts
Emory University, 2011

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

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DEDICATION
To Mom and Dad

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take the time to thank all of those who have helped me in the completion of this thesis. This project has been in the work for many years and could have only been achieved with the help and support of faculty and colleagues along the way. I originally became interested in Northern Irish poetry in the undergraduate classes of Professor Geraldine Higgins and Ronald Schuchard, both of Emory University. Without this introduction, who knows what this thesis may have been. Of this department, I am extremely grateful to Professor Ed Madden for being willing to direct this thesis topic, and for offering help and support along the way. I must also thank Professor Tom Rice for always being willing to answer questions and for offering guidance.

Along with the support of faculty, I have also been supported by my colleagues and friends. To Graham, Katherine, and Erin, your willingness to listen and to provide laughter has been invaluable. I would also like to send my thanks to the person who has been there through the good and bad of this project, to my best friend, Kesley; you have given me more calmness and strength than I could ever repay.

And, finally, to those I have known the longest. I will never be able to thank my family, and most importantly, my parents, for all the love and support they have given me over the years. You have always been there to listen and to say things will be okay. Without you, this project would never have been possible, much less completed. This is for you.

ABSTRACT

As two prominent figures of Northern Irish poetry, Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon are often discussed as being “difficult” and “oblique.” However, I argue that this categorization of their poetry is too simplistic and overlooks the dissimilarities in their writing process and view of language, and ultimately, in their poetry itself. By going back to the fundamentals of their works, I claim that the basis for this dissimilarity is, in fact, a differing view of the founding blocks of poetic language. McGuckian sees syntax as being the important factor while Muldoon focuses on the individual lexical meaning of words. These two differences also have implications for the themes of their poetry. McGuckian’s view of syntax as unstable and embroidered causes her view of the relationship between subject and object to be interesting and varied, and this relationship plays itself out through McGuckian’s poetic comparisons to her own body, the creation of a new, Irigarian feminine language, and to the reversible and collapsible connection between writer and reader. For Muldoon, this focus on syntax is replaced by an attention to the individual words, and this results in a view of these words as the bridges of language; they connect and unify meaning. These bridges cause Muldoon to concentrate on the type of themes that often require a connection: translation, history, and repetition. All three of these themes are about bridging the divide, either between languages, histories, or poems themselves. Such differences in their poetic language and themes offers the rationale for more in depth study into an individual poet’s writing process and poetic output, which I argue needs to be done in order to move away from simplistically

categorizing a writer's body of work simply based on one small feature. Ultimately, this starts a conversation for the way we as critics and readers study and write about poetry.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When for years I have months
and my soul chimes like an inhabited word...

“Gaeltach na Fuiseoige” (McGuckian 43)

How often have I carried our family word
for the hot water bottle
to a strange bed...

“Quoof” (Muldoon 17)

John Goodby, in his book, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness Into History*, claims:

It is a fact of modern literary history that Irish poetry has, since the early 1960s, flourished as never before....[b]ut it has been Northern Irish poetry which, since the end of the 1960s, has attracted the lion's share of praise from readers and critics and which has been the most influential on poetic practice beyond the island. (1)

Among these Northern Irish poets who have found acclaim are: Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, and perhaps most notably, Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney. While all of these have attracted some share of the praise described by Goodby, two in particular stand out in more recent memory because of their inventive, and often difficult, use of language: Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon. McGuckian, the producer of 19 collections and chapbooks, has always been on critics' radar, especially since her inclusion in the 1986 edition of *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Temple “McGuckian”). However, she has recently experienced a renewed interest in her poetry with the recent

publication of an inquiry into her work titled *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, which contains 11 chapters and one interview with the female poet. McGuckian, born and raised in Belfast, has been a Writer-in-Residence at Queens University, Belfast, and a visiting poet and instructor at the University of California, Berkeley. Her most recent collection, *The High Caul Cap*, was published in 2012.¹

Muldoon has enjoyed a slightly higher profile as both an academic and a poet, and his biography reads as a long list of accomplishments. Born in County Armagh, and educated at Queen's University, Belfast, Muldoon won the 1994 T. S. Eliot Prize, the 2003 Pulitzer Prize, was appointed Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, and is currently the Howard G. B. Clark '21 Professor at Princeton University and the Poetry Editor of *The New Yorker*. *The Times Literary Supplement* has described him as "the most significant English-language poet born since the Second World War."²

With all this interest surrounding them both, their works are still often grouped together based on their supposed difficulty and obliqueness. Shane Murphy, in his articles, "Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian" and "'Roaming root of multiple meanings': Irish Language and Identity" looks at how their various uses of intertextuality help explain their obliquity. Elmer Andrews in "'Some Sweet Disorder' – The Poetry of Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, and Medbh McGuckian," argues that their obliquity is slightly different, but still their defining feature. This focus on obliquity results in a categorization of the poet's work, and subsequent study only looks at the minor differences that separate them from each other. But, when closely

¹ Information for McGuckian was pulled from the "McGuckian, Medbh" entry on the "Postcolonial Studies @ Emory" webpage.

² Information for Muldoon was pulled from his biography on his website, paulmuldoon.net.

comparing not only their poetry but also their writing process and their view of language, it quickly becomes apparent that while both Muldoon and McGuckian produce this ‘difficult’ poetry, the path they take, the internal logic for doing so, and even the final output, are all markedly different. A focus on their obliquity obscures the very different processes and effects of the poetry.

The main difference between these poets is their view of what is the building block of poetry. Is it the individual lexical units – the words? Or is it the syntactical phrases? In this thesis, I argue that for McGuckian, the focus of her poetic language is on the syntactical phrases and how these phrases combine and weave together to form the final poetic product. And, for Muldoon, the emphasis of his language is the individual words and the exacting or shifting meaning of each of these lexical units. This underlying focus shows up in the writing process and the way each poet views both language itself and the more specific poetic language. This focus then results in great implications for each poet’s body of work.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the focus on either syntax or lexical units plays out in the writing process (using archival materials), the poet’s view of language, as seen in his/her poetry, and finally, to study the implications of these processes. First, I will focus on McGuckian’s writing process and language, and show how her ‘word-hoard’ style of writing results in a database of syntax that can be pulled from in order to create a poem. Her view of language, as a result of this style of writing, is one that highlights poetic syntax as the building block of poetic meaning. I also show how the underpinning for this style of writing comes from McGuckian’s own unease with both English and Irish languages. From this, I follow with a study into the implications

of this focus on syntax by centering my argument on the writer's view of her body-as-pen, her role as a female poet within an Irigarian theoretical framework, and finally, the role of both the writer and reader in understanding her poetry. I then turn to Muldoon and his emphasis on lexical units. In order to explain this, I look at both his writing process, his view of language as a series of specific and exact words strung together, and how his personal experience with both English and Irish cause him to see moving between languages as word-play rather than a study of imperial languages. Lastly, I argue that Muldoon's poetry centers on three themes: translation, history, and repetition, and that all of these things arise from the implications of his writing process and view of poetic language. In the conclusion, I will look back on these arguments, as well as draw deeper implications for how the work of a poet is ultimately influenced by everything in a poet's life, and that it is this understanding which leads to the realization that while Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon may both be oblique or difficult, to focus thus on the surface level of their poetry obscures understanding of how and why their words work.

CHAPTER 2

MEDBH MCGUCKIAN'S WRITING PROCESS AND LANGUAGE

In an interview with Helen Blakeman, Medbh McGuckian stated, "I think poetry exists because the way we use words, when we are talking to people, is so inadequate...[poetry] is no longer just information—it's just a whirlwind of conflicting comment about everything" (63). This definition of poetry as a "whirlwind of conflicting comment" accurately describes much of McGuckian's own poetry. The contradictions and nonsensicalities present within her works have long divided critics and reviewers alike over what exactly to make of such difficult and nontransparent poetry. Some, like fellow Northern Irish poet James Simmons, have classified her poetry as "a salutary joke by one who hates the excesses of reviewers or literary critics or bad poetry and knows she can elicit rave reviews by writing an alluring book of nonsense" (Simmons 8, as cited by Murphy 67). Even Irish poet Bernard O'Donoghue, who recognizes the complexity and value of her poems, has previously stated that even though she "is a genuine symbolist," she is also the "most cryptic [writer]," and that within her poems the "occasional real-name glossing would not be unwelcome" (60).

This criticism for being either too oblique or too superficial has within the last several years of study also been compounded by various charges of plagiarism. In his 1998 essay, "'You took away my biography': the poetry of Medbh McGuckian," noted McGuckian critic Shane Alcobia-Murphy unearths the intertextualities at play within McGuckian's poems. While doing so, he also staunchly defends McGuckian's

appropriation of other works by arguing that her very act of choosing and remodeling the quotes is not an act of plagiarism, and instead is an act of building and transforming the given material into a new work of art—the poem (110, 132). Although Murphy describes McGuckian’s writing process, he does so by focusing only on how her use of the vocabulary and figurative language from other works creates this intertextuality, and as such, deepens the overall meaning of her poems while also connecting them to a larger set of texts (Murphy 3). However, this critique only focuses on the poetic language of the source texts and their probable connections to the poem’s meaning. By focusing solely on the source texts, Murphy displaces the attention from McGuckian’s own personal writing process and what this process means for the language of her poetry. The purpose of this chapter is to look at both McGuckian’s own writing process, and what this indicates about her view of language itself and its role in her poetry.

2.1 MEDBH MCGUCKIAN’S WRITING PROCESS

First, it is important to unpack how McGuckian goes about writing her poetry. When asked by Murphy to describe her writing process, McGuckian responds:

I never write just blindly, I never sit down without an apparatus, I always have a collections of words—it’s like a bird building a nest—I gather materials over the two weeks, or whatever. And I keep a notebook or a diary for the words which are happening to me and occurring to me. I never sit down without those because otherwise you would just go mad, trying to think of words. (Murphy 85)

As Murphy later notes, this “collection of words” derives from the literary biographies McGuckian reads over the span of two weeks before sitting down to write her poetry. The biographies become her source for poetic language and allow her the freedom to combine and create with language from the biographers as well as from her own word-hoard. The form and function of this word-hoard shows up in her poetry as well as her

interviews. Across the five stanzas of “A Dream in Three Colors,” McGuckian speaks of the exhausting and almost mysterious process of producing a poem. During this process, she is “velvet stroked the wrong way” and at “[t]he point when...sleep is not known” (44). It is during the description of this process that McGuckian characterizes her word-hoard and moment of poetic inspiration as:

Every hour the voices of nouns
Wind me up from their scattered rooms,
Where they sit for years, unable to meet,
Like pearls that have lost their clasp,

Or boards snapped by sea-water
That slither towards a shore. (44)

The words, the nouns, have been lying broken in various rooms, and it is McGuckian’s task to find these broken nouns and to make connections between the nouns (to string them up like pearls) in order to form links and meanings between the words. McGuckian elaborates on this process in another interview with Rebecca Wilson of *Cencrastus*, when she responds to a question of how she works with an idea or inspiration by saying, “I just take an assortment of words, though not exactly at random, and I kind of effuse them. It’s like embroidery...They are very intricate, my poems, a weaving of patterns of in’s and out’s and contradictions, one thing playing off another” (Interview with Wilson 18-19). While not addressing where said “assortment of words” comes from, McGuckian indicates the precision necessary to transform various phrases into complete (and complex) poems.

This description of nouns strung together and of poetry as embroidered also makes McGuckian's poetry more metonymic than metaphorical.³ Helen Blakeman, in her article "Metaphor and Metonymy in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry," claims that in "McGuckian's poetry, metaphor is often employed to the detriment of grammatical regulations and metonymy" (62). The insularity of her poetry and the creation of her word-hoards (as will be seen later) seems to point more towards an association between words rather than just similarity, and it is this association that suggests metonymy. By "weaving patterns" and "playing off" contradictions, McGuckian writes her poetry based on contiguity between words rather than conceptual similarity or metaphor. Her metonymy derives from her own understood association between words, not that of a collective body's associations. That is, when she writes her poems from the biographies' vocabularies, she pulls words together that mean things *to her* and as such, these connections further result in an insular and hard-to-understand poem; the association is understood only by one person – the poet.

³ The ideas of metaphor and metonymy are being used in a Jakobsonian manner as relating to the "bipolar structure of language" and semiotic systems, not strictly relating to the literary figure of speech (115).

Grey's Lane.

~~who wielded silence~~

~~cuts of sky~~

~~a thinking which dwells its substance~~

~~its central spirit~~

~~the light would be glad to be the itself in you~~

~~for years I have months~~

~~like inhabited ward~~

~~the sand chins~~

New Year Day.
Jan. 1. 1997.

~~pair of people~~

~~the light yellow~~

~~entire meaning~~

~~bare now~~

~~laying word against word~~

~~injection brooded in the wound~~

~~the admitted highway~~

~~greatest ought~~

hush in
Inland?

Gaeltacht na Fúiseoige.

Cuts of sky-wielded silence

Yellow ~~the~~ the light: the light

That would be glad

To be the itself in you.

like for years I have months

And my sand chins

like an inhabited ward

a thinking which dwells its substance

Its substance, bare now,

Entire meaning, laying

word against word

like pair of people,

~~brooding~~ Broods in the wound

an admitted injection,

the high road's central

Greatest ought.

Figure 2.1. "Gaeltacht na Fúiseoige" Manuscript.; Box 21, Folder 32; Medbh McGuckian papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

The poem's construction from metonymic word-hoard can be seen in Figure 2.1 with the draft of "Gaeltacht na Fuiseoige" from McGuckian's 2001 collection *Drawing Ballerinas*. "Gaeltacht na Fuiseoige" is Irish for "Gaeltacht of the Lark" and is the name given to the Irish-speaking parts of the H-Block in Long Kesh (Chriost 167). The "Lark" is the bird "identified with Bobby Sands in Irish republican mythology" (Chriost 203).⁴ For this poem's draft, the top part of her writing paper contains the "word-lists" that Murphy mentions in his article, while the bottom part of the paper is the poem itself (3). Although Murphy classifies the top section as "word-lists," they are more word-banks in which McGuckian has deposited her choice of words and phrases from the read biographies. As McGuckian begins "embroidering" her poem, the phrases are removed from the word-bank and take up their place within the poem itself. The final result is a poem that is mostly in its complete, finalized form. Unlike other writers, who may go through multiple drafts of a poem or a work before it reaches its final stages, McGuckian does not go through many drafts before reaching the final project. Instead, the majority of her work comes in the pre-writing stages with the formation of her word-banks.

By reorienting the way we as critics and readers look at McGuckian's writing process and her use of the word-bank, we can see how her writing style actually fits into a much larger understanding of writing itself. In an article about the purpose of databases, "Against Thinking," Peter Stallybrass comments on databases and the transformation of archives in a way that resonates with McGuckian's writing process. While the actual

⁴ According to Chriost, Gaeltacht na Fuiseoige not only held prisoners who already spoke Irish but also served a place where a republican political prisoner could learn the Irish language. The members of these wings were often considered the "most zealous" and "there was a very considerable waiting list to join those wings" (Languages and the Military 168).

argument concerning digital technology is of little use for this thesis, Stallybrass's understanding of the purpose of a database and how it works makes sense when looking at Figure 2.1 and its representation of McGuckian's style. Stallybrass notes that Shakespeare himself "appropriated for his own use what he read or heard," and as such, "Shakespeare consciously practiced his own form of database" (1581). Likewise, by appropriating the phrases from the biographies, the word-bank at the top of McGuckian's paper is actually its own mini database that she collects through the process of her reading. Furthermore, Stallybrass expounds on the importance of understanding this type of writing database (and databases in general) as "renew[ing] our sense of language as 'a tissue of quotations' from which we cannot, even if we wanted to, remove ourselves" (1582). By referencing "a tissue of quotations," Stallybrass also links the overall idea of database and language back to Barthes's "Death of the Author," and the idea that:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theoretical' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. (2)

All of McGuckian's own language may not be 'original' and from her own creative thinking, but it is a blending and clashing of her source materials with her own personal understanding of and association with both the material and her intended output. In looking at McGuckian's "word-lists" as word-banks/databases, a critic/reader can see that she is not misappropriating another author's work, but rather using certain phrases in her own unique way in order to connect her ideas to those previous while at the same time creating a new work of art out of the pieces of historical and cultural language.

2.2 MCGUCKIAN'S VIEW OF LANGUAGE

McGuckian's word-bank/database style of writing also points towards her own views of language as a series of syntactic connections that provide meaning. The *connection* between the words is more than important than the words themselves; the order of the phrase, and the overall meaning of the phrase, means more than the individual understanding of each word. In his chapter, "'Some Sweet Disorder' – the Poetry of Subversion: Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian," Elmer Andrews explains this syntactical view:

By contrast [to the counterculture implications of Muldoon and Paulin's writings], McGuckian is an ostensibly much more conservative writer, quieter, less brash, respectful of syntactic structures. But what we find in her poetry is that the logicity signaled by the apparently strict syntactic patterning is essentially gestural or parodic, undermined by the illogicality of the content. The conventional structures of reason are made to hold what they are not normally required to hold, and the resulting pull between logic and illogicality gives the poetry its peculiar tension. (135)

But, while McGuckian does pay more deference to strict syntactic patterning, her writing process shows that it has less to do with trying to create "illogicality of the content," and more to do with her view of poetic language-as-phrases. She is not intentionally writing illogical content, but rather she either writes her own poetic phrases or imbues those taken from the word-bank with her own emotions and history. This insular and personal habitation of words highlights the instability of language not the illogicality of her syntax. While the phrase may make sense to McGuckian, the reader remains unaware of the specific meaning/definition McGuckian originally desired for the phrase. This writer-specific understanding and meaning further highlights the metonymical nature of McGuckian's poetry. The inhabited words are the contiguous sequence from which McGuckian writes. In using her own sequence of re-inhabited words, McGuckian's substitutions often come out as "illogical" to both the average reader and even the

knowledgeable critic. As such, by crafting these seemingly illogical phrases from her own word-hoard, McGuckian shows how the instability of language means that there are no closed systems when it comes to the signification of meaning, but instead the phrases produce meaning depending on the reader's own understood association of the words that build the phrases. While the phrase itself, as a syntactical unit, holds a unique meaning in relation to the poem as a whole, it is the instability of language and the slippage this generates that allows the phrases to continually build and rebuild meaning.

This view of poetic language as being syntactical and unstable rather than strictly lexical can be seen not only in McGuckian's writing process but also in her poetry. The poem "Gaeltacht na Fuisseoige" from Figure 2.1 is an example of this implication. In the poem, McGuckian describes both the cells of the H-Block and the importance of the language movement within the Block. In the second and third stanzas of the poem, McGuckian writes:

[m]y soul chimes
like an inhabited word,
a thinking which sucks

its substance, barer now,
enticing meaning, laying
word against word
like pairs of people. (6-12)

First, McGuckian equates her "soul chim[ing]" with the chiming of an "inhabited word" (6-7). An "inhabited word" means that the word itself holds a greater meaning than its dictionary meaning. For the poet, the words are not just a block of text on a page or an image in a line of poetry. Instead, the words *inhabit* a larger meaning. To reiterate the opening quote of this essay, McGuckian views words in poetry as creating "comment"

and emotion (Interview with Blakeman 63). Likewise, in the same interview,

McGuckian states:

I think the responsibility the poet has is to *revive*, it is to wash the words, I don't mean launder them but re-vivify them, put them through your head and bring them out at the other end...and see if they can...go in someone else's head and *mean* something. (68)

The words of the writing process are alive and waiting for meaning, meaning that can shift and change in order to suit the poet's purpose. In using "inhabited words" rather than just "words," McGuckian indicates that words are in someway living and growing as writers need them and not just static, stable words printed on a page. "Word" is also a partial homophone for "ward," the very thing the poem is about, and in some sense, this demonstrates further how words are inhabited. A prison ward is inhabited by multiple people adding to the population, and this multiplicity adds to the overall inhabitedness of said ward. In a prison ward, like the H-Block, the ward may recall a certain image, but the temperament of the ward itself changes and moves as the inmates come and go. A ward is as unstable a definition as a word, yet at the same time, they both appear as clearly demarcated spaces and parts of language. As the ward does not exist without its inhabitants, the word does not stand on its own within its own lexical meaning, and it is this 'inhabitation' that produces the instability of poetic languages since there is more history and meaning behind the printed word than simply what the dictionary states.

Secondly, McGuckian describes the "inhabited word" as a thinking which "entic[es] meaning" by "laying / word against word / like pairs of people" (7, 10-12). Not only does the phrase connect the soul of the poet to the writing process of laying down words but also it gives the words a sense of life beyond being text on a page. Each individual word takes on the connotation of being an individual body/person. This

individual body/person then forms a connection to the body next to it as, once again, McGuckian refers back to the H-Block and the condition they laid out in their demands as well as the way the bodies of the dead hunger strikers were laid out after their death. With this connection to both the demand to revivify the Irish language and the finiteness of the dead bodies, McGuckian further highlights the dichotomy that exists in language: the static (the dead) that comes from only seeing words as printed text and the vividness of language that communicates in all of its instability. It is this vividness that allows words to make connections and grow. By creating connections with the words around them, the “inhabited word” takes up a new habitation within a syntactical phrase. This poetic syntax can then build upon other phrases to construct a new poem; the demands laid out by the prisoners can overrule the image of the dead bodies and allow for new life to form within the language.

The idea of building phrases together can be seen in the poem “Dante’s Own Day,” from her 1994 collection, *Captain Lavender*. The poem deals with the relationship between an author and her text, and how the text gradually grows and becomes more and more layered as it moves away from the author. The second stanza makes the embroidered writing process and the importance of unstable, syntactical phrases clearly visible by stating:

The struggles of a series of intertwined minds,
arranged by no mind, one on top of another,
in a growing ribbon of warmth. (34)

Whereas in the previous interview McGuckian discusses the poet as embroidering the poem, here, this process becomes pictorial as McGuckian depicts what goes into “embroidering” a poem. By embroidering (a typically feminine job) a poem, the poet

takes the intertwined minds and lines of others and weaves them together to create a work of braided meaning.

After this description, McGuckian moves to explaining how the finished poetic product, “the shell,” is something “not to be lived in,” but is a place that can “stret[ch] backward” as well as exist around the moment (34).⁵ The poem exists as something similar to Benjamin’s angel of history in that it is looking back while being pushed forward; the poem is a synchronic moment with attachments to diachronic time. The layered meanings of the poem allow it to exist within the moment of its production and also to connect to the multiplicity of sources and histories surrounding it.

This idea of the poem removed from the poet is then met with McGuckian’s view of this removed, unstable meaning. The fourth stanza of the poem states:

An acorn of a blind, denuded, unbegun,
unsheltered and unfinished, draws across a floor
on the mortal side of language. (34)

The very phrase, “an acorn of a...” exists as unstable syntactic meaning because the possessive noun that the acorn belongs to is not present. The acorn “draws across a floor / on the mortal side of language,” but we –the readers—never learn what the unsheltered, unfinished possessive object actually is. This unfinished possessive object also highlights the metonymic style of McGuckian’s poetry; whatever it is the acorn and its possessive are meant to stand in for, that substitution is only truly visible to McGuckian because of her own mass of understood associations. Without this knowledge, the reader is left with only an unfinished prepositional phrase. As Danielle Sered notes in her article, “‘By

⁵ Lesley Wheeler, in her article “Both Flower and Flower Gatherer: Medbh McGuckian’s ‘The Flower Master’ and H.D.’s ‘Sea Garden,’ discusses how McGuckian will often interchange shell with spell in a pattern reminiscent of H.D.

Escaping and [Leaving] a Mark': Authority and the Writing Subject in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," this lack of completion for the prepositional phrase "highlights the destabilizing quality of McGuckian's verse: in these poems, our syntactical expectations are rarely met" (281). This statement extends Elmer Andrews's view of the illogicality of syntax in McGuckian's poetry. Like Andrews, Sered recognizes that the syntactical phrases often do not make any sense whatsoever to the reader; however, Sered accurately places the burden of this 'making logical sense' onto the reader rather than what the writer inherently intends. As Sered also stresses, McGuckian's poetic language "is not a language that successfully fixes meaning" (281). McGuckian's poetic syntax insists that poetic language continually moves and turns as it inhabits various positions within phrases and within both the reader's and the writer's own contiguous vocabularies.

2.3 ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

As a Northern Irish Catholic, McGuckian's heritage is Irish and this is the language of her "native...peasant and repressed and destroyed ancestors and ancestresses" (Interview with Wilson 20). But, due to the British colonization of Ireland, English is the primary language. Marthine Satris, in her article "Frustrated Meanings: Silence in the Poetry of Catherine Walsh and Medbh McGuckian," discusses how in multiple interviews McGuckian has expressed her distaste for the language in which her poetry is written. In the past, McGuckian has stated that "[a]ll of the English language repels me...[i]t basically gets on my nerves," and that she "want[s] to make English sound like a foreign language to itself" (McGuckian interview, as cited by Satris 1). McGuckian then further highlights this in her interview with Wilson when she notes, "I think I'm not English. But I write in English. I don't hark back to any Irish poets who were writing in

Irish...In a way, I'm an English poet, trying to reverse that into an Irishness that is an impossible dream" (20). This disconnection from both English and Irish languages and lack of "roots" in any one country establishes the basis of liminality between the languages. This liminality then allows McGuckian to alienate the languages from their own established meanings in the same way she is alienated from the languages. By further alienating the languages from their established meanings, McGuckian continues to further destabilize her poetic syntax and language.

This alienation and destabilization can be seen in one of her poems dealing with the idea of languages. In *The Soldiers of the Year II*'s "English as a Foreign Language." The entire poem centers on both McGuckian making English sound like a foreign language to the reader and trying to make sense of how it feels to speak in a tongue you do not consider your own. The poem begins with this sense of alienation stating:

Skin over the mouth's repeating gold watch:
lame piano with torn-out strings;
the coldest of nature's shutters. (70)

The opening line depicts an inability to truly speak because not only is there skin covering the mouth but also the mouth's "gold watch" only repeats rather than chimes anew. This inability to speak continues with the image of an unplayable piano that has had its strings torn out of it, which suggests a person who has her tongue ripped out and is no longer able to speak for herself. These images of the inability to play or to speak are then later met in the fourth stanza of the poem with images of disconnection from reality and the outside world. The fourth stanza reads:

House without chimney or the grasp
of the earth, all stove, all wilderness,
all auscultation and maceration,
centripetal and centrifugal

as sea-robbed land.... (70)

The house has no way of letting smoke out nor does it have any true hold to the solidness of the earth. Instead, it is all smoke (“all stove”) and “all wilderness” even though it does not have a grasp of earth. The house, like McGuckian, exists in this liminal space between the solid and real and the smoke and the creative. The continuation of the lines into “all auscultation and maceration” portrays how whatever the house represents is all internal voices and softening of itself; it is continually saturated in its own thoughts.

Later, it is both forced to follow a curved path while at the same time being pulled away from this center of rotation (“centripetal and centrifugal”). Finally, it exists solely as the house on land robbed of its sea, which stands in direct opposition to the beginning lines of a house without a “grasp / of the earth.” Everything lives in this in-between space of being/not-being as the poet tries to determine her place within the two language systems, while at the same time dismantling the way a reader reads the English language of the poem by breaking everything down into these short phrases that barely seem to hold together. This unsettledness and dismantling of language and place is a major contributing factor to McGuckian’s view of language as unstable and alive. Since she always has to imbue a language seemingly foreign to her with her own meaning and understanding, she recognizes the manipulability of language and uses this manipulability within her own defamiliarizing forms of poetic syntax. In further removing and alienating herself from the language of her poetry, McGuckian effectively settles the idea of language as being unstable, alive, and able to be manipulated.

For McGuckian, her difficult syntactic poetry is shaped by her own position between the English and Irish languages, her writing process, and her own personal view

of language as unstable and dynamic. All of these things combine to produce a focus on syntax that then leads to greater implications of her poetry and poetic form.

CHAPTER 3

POETIC IMPLICATIONS OF MCGUCKIAN'S LANGUAGE

The embroidering and weaving of syntactic meaning shows McGuckian's view of language as layered, dynamic, alive, and unstable. This view of language implicates itself in her poetry when McGuckian ties both the writing process and language to the dynamic and unstable human body. However, the connection between her body and her poetry is more than just a tie; it is a possession of the body in which inspiration takes hold and allows the poet to write her poem. McGuckian herself professes this "taking over" in an interview. When asked how she works with an idea or inspiration, McGuckian responds:

Well, it works with me, it takes over, if it's a good one, and I'm just like a medium for it. I don't really have to work. (Interview with Wilson 18)

However, this idea of body as medium for possession is more than just a simple "muse taking over" scenario. The possession may take over the poet's body, but it then uses the body as a means to move through the writing process before being expunged in the form of a poem. As such, the possessed body encompasses the entirety of the writing process, from the means of writing – the pen – to the final message of the writing itself – the poem. The embroidered writing and the possessed body work together because they both represent the layered, unstable representation of language present in McGuckian's poetry. As the embroidered writing process produces poems in which language and meaning appear unstable, the possessed body of the poet is also unstable and constantly changing.

Once possessed, the body moves from being the writing instrument to the material of the poem and finally to existing as the completed poetic form. But, since the possessed body produced the poem, there are still strings tying that poem back to the now-unpossessed body. Similarly, the embroidered writing takes and morphs various phrases into a specific poem but it continues to pull meaning and history from its previous source texts, and thus produces a complete poem with a layered history. This unstable, possessed body is especially relevant to a female poet whose body not only undergoes the changes of puberty and maturity but also those that go along with childbirth. The woman's body enlarges with possession of the child, and then shrinks as she gives birth to the child. This is similar to the enlarging and shrinking of a poet's creative process as she moves from being possessed by an idea or inspiration to finally giving 'birth' to this possession in the form of a poem. The similarities between the two are even greater when the partners of both mother and poet enter into the image. The partner of the mother helps to produce the child while in the case of the poet, the partner, i.e. the source texts, also helps to produce the poem. In the end, the embroidered writing process and the possessed female body – both in their instability – yield a creative output. For McGuckian, this creative output, specifically the poem, helps to encompass and define the role of the female poet and the relationship between writer and reader. But first, a more thorough analysis of the body as medium for possession.

3.1 BODY AS PEN

This first implication of language as the unstable human body can be seen when compared to how other poets write about their writing instruments and their reasons for writing in general. In his 1966 volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, Northern Irish

poet Seamus Heaney uses the poem “Digging” to describe his own view of writing and his connectedness to his poetry. Within the poem, Heaney visualizes “[his] father, digging” in the flowerbed as linked to the years previous “[w]here he was digging” in the potato drills (3). This concatenated image of past and present further presents itself when Heaney states, “the old man [Heaney’s father] could handle a spade. / Just like his old man” (3). The past and present of Heaney’s father become tied to the past of Heaney’s grandfather. These links and ties become Heaney’s reasons for writing poetry – and this poem specifically – in order to show how he can and cannot follow the trade of his male ancestors. Heaney has “no spade to follow men like them” (3).

While he may have no spade to follow them, he does have a spade-like instrument – the pen. Whereas Heaney’s male ancestors used a spade to dig up Irish earth, Heaney utilizes his own pen to metaphorically dig through the history of Ireland, but the instrument to dig through Irish history quickly becomes loaded with connotations. In the first stanza, Heaney describes his pen as “snug as a gun” that rests “[b]etween my finger and my thumb” (3). For Heaney, the pen stands as both means of violence and means of “digging”; violence and history simultaneously exist in Heaney’s writing instrument, and the now loaded-with-meaning pen will be used to continue the Heaney men’s tradition of reconnecting to Irish earth, and as such, their own history and past.

For McGuckian, the instrument for the writing process is the body and the inspiration that inhabits the body (as seen in the quote from the chapter’s introduction), and as such, her writing instrument is more than a spade used for digging. Instead, her pen-as-body reflects back on her animated view of language as a whole. Rather than the inanimate, spade-as-pen, McGuckian’s instrument is the completely animated human

body. As animated and unstable as her view of language, McGuckian's pen-as-body is an appropriate match for her embroidered writing process and dynamic poetics. This appropriate match and its conflation with an ability for violence can be seen in "Butcher's Table," from her 1998 volume *Drawing Ballerinas*. The poem describes a warlike atmosphere that invades both personal and private spaces. Using the pronoun "we," McGuckian depicts a couple "fl[y]ing between two sheets of heavenly blue / which crossed the top of the world" (63). This stanza, in which the sheets can be both the sheets a couple moves through while in bed and the blue sheets of sky a plane flies through, quickly becomes something more desolate and violent as the couple finds themselves "once again...alone in the war." They have "sown the cemetery with mines," and "a jigsaw / of bodies mull[ing] the dust" presents the couple as the solitary figures remaining at the end of the poem (63). This solitude soon takes a turn as the pronouns change from the "we" of the couple to the second person address of "you" and finally to the possessive "my." We see this shift in the penultimate stanza:

If Overlord has started
you must make the gun part of your arm, squeeze it
like an orange in your palm, write with it as a prayer-
like pencil. But what a little life the dead tanks can take,
as they repair our country, with my gun arm against
the door. (63)

The command, "you must make the gun part of your arm" is almost as though McGuckian is addressing her readers, but, because of the turn to first person at the end, McGuckian is also addressing herself here. Whereas Heaney chose to invoke his past ancestors and his current work, McGuckian speaks to herself about what her work must be. This stark "you" is a reminder that the poems are meant to come from her own

unstable body and reflect the unstable, violent world; they are meant to be written with the “gun-arm.”

After the “Overlord has started,” the pen should not just rest “as snug as a gun,” as in Heaney’s heritage poem, but the gun must become “part of your arm.”⁶ As part of the arm, the gun acts “as a prayer- / like pencil” with which to write. The body now encompasses both the ability to write and the ability to commit violence. But how effective can a gun-arm be against the “dead” and “repair[ing]” tanks? For matching force against force, the gun-arm is not very helpful; however, McGuckian’s gun-arm is meant as a recording device that holds in itself the possibility to commit violence. The “prayer - / like pencil” gun-arm records the violence occurring between the two opposing forces, and commits this recording to cultural and personal record. Unlike Heaney, whose “snug-as-a-gun-pen” digs through Irish history in order to make sense of the present, McGuckian’s gun-arm cryptically records current events. McGuckian’s pen is capable of violence while at the same time recording the violent occurrences.

For Heaney there is a separation between the writing of the poem and his personal body, and it is the instrument of writing, the pen, which occupies this separation. While he may write about history and violence, there is still a certain amount of removal from the events; he does not exist as his poetry. However, with McGuckian, this division does not exist. The writing process is part of the body because the body becomes the instrument through which McGuckian weaves and records the texts together. This means

⁶ While what exactly Overlord is meant to be is still fairly oblique, it may be a reference to Operation Overlord, which was the code-name for Allied invasion of German occupied Western Europe, beginning with the Battle of Normandy (Hall 6). In this poem, Overlord is the figurative language for an invasion, the type of event to which the last stanza appears to be reacting.

that the writing process for McGuckian resides in a more insular space -- the body instead of the pen -- and as such, the oblique poetry that comes out of the poet's body is intensely personal and not necessarily marked by an easily understandable public message.

Because of this, the poem represents McGuckian's poetry as serving three purposes: evoking emotion from the reader (regardless of the exact meaning of the poem), recording the history of present Northern Ireland, and perhaps most importantly for the poet, signifying the connection of the body to the writing process itself.⁷ By using poetic language to connect the body to a weapon that can serve both as a writing instrument and as an indicator of protection against violence, McGuckian signifies that there is an intensely personal mental and physical connection to her writing process and the history it contains.

While "Butcher's Table" presents the poet's body as pen, other McGuckian poems portray the language of the poems as a body. Rather than the possessed medium used to write the poems, a body inhabits the same space as the words themselves. However, body's form is not that of the poet, but rather that of a child. In arguably one of McGuckian's most oblique works, *On Ballycastle Beach*, this theme of body-as-language continues throughout the book. In "For a Young Matron," McGuckian writes:

Approaching all colours
From their peaks,
We try to imagine each sentence
In a crosstown light. (41)

⁷ In Blakeman's interview, when asked about the poetic message, McGuckian responded: "I don't think it matters if that comes over to the reader, because the personal message that I have to give to myself is the most important thing for me, and the poem may drift away...but my needs are just to keep on writing—the writing process" (64).

When looking at the composed writing, the couple focuses on “each sentence,” meaning that rather than having the lexical expressions take priority, it is the syntax that dominates the vision of the writers. This also maintains its previous connections to the other words and phrases because the couple approaches the syntactical phrase in the same way they “approac[h] all colors”: from the peak. In looking at the peak, the couple can see all of the variations that build the colors to the peaks in the same way that looking at “each sentence” in the “crosstown light” allows the couple to view both the sentence and that sentence’s connectedness to other parts of language and history. By looking at it “[i]n a crosstown light,” the sentences become highlighted as a line or intersection of connected meanings.

These sentences are eventually broken down, and when they are, the individual words become more than signifiers of lexical meaning. As the couple continues their review process, the man speaks:

Why not forget this word,
He asks. It’s edgeless,
Echoeless, it is stretched so,
You cannot become its passenger.

An aeroplane unlike
A womb claims its space
And takes it with it.
It says, Once it wasn’t like this. (41)

The man focuses on the word in order to perfect the meaning for the previously highlighted individual sentences. When speaking of the word, the man likens the word to something without form. It is “edgeless,” “echoeless,” and “stretched,” and therefore can mean too many things within the sentence, and too much is nothing at all. Although these views of language as words and sentences resonate with other parts of

McGuckian's corpus, the last line of this stanza, along with the lines of the next, pulls together why this too unstable language does not work within this poem. The male figure tells the "you" (presumably the young matron, although with McGuckian pronouns can prove as intangible and indirect as the rest of her poetry) that it (she) cannot become the "passenger" of the word; she cannot inhabit something so formless. The form of this formlessness is that of a baby, not a woman's body, and for this poem, the baby serves as a reminder of the poem the female poet cannot fully inhabit. The baby as unstable form becomes clearer with the next three lines, which show how an aeroplane has its space (and its passengers) and takes its space with itself. The womb, however, cannot take its passenger (the baby) with it. Instead, the child moves away from the maternal figure and becomes something the mother no longer has complete control over. The mother/poet often loses the baby/poetic intent when writing. This equates the output of the female poet with the same output of the female body: the poem as child.

Another poem in *On Ballycastle Beach* also explicitly refers to poetic language as child. In "To the Oak-Leaf Camps," the speaker of the poem is once again concentrating on the writing process and states:

Both of us lie in the dark to compose
Verses as we were taught. I think of them
As a child you know will be born dead
At three minutes to ten, and put my hands
Behind my back á la papa, persuaded
That the last pain of the second stage
Is no worse than the one before the last. (47)

Again, another couple is trying to compose verse, although this time in the dark rather than the "crosstown light." This act of procreation leads to the verses being thought of "[a]s a child you know will be born dead." The poetic language, similar to that in "For A

Young Matron,” is a place of inhabitation for the child, but “Camps” shows how this “child” is the result of a creative “birthing” process. The speaker continues in this “birthing” mode by emphasizing “[t]hat the last pain of the second stage / Is no worse than the one before the last.” As critic Guinn Batten notes, “‘To the Oak-Leaf Camps’ seems a nearly direct statement concerning not only the writing of poetry as pregnancy but also the loss that may follow or even abort a poem’s gestation” (229). The poetic language-child is the result of the procreation between poet and imaginative process, and often this can result in a loss for the poet if either the meaning gets away from her or the poem simply does not work. This impregnation shows how the woman has moved from being the object used to write the poem (the pen) to the subject (the writer) that creates the object (the poem child).

3.2 ROLE OF THE FEMALE POET

This reversal and collapse of subject and object has been described by other critics as a response to McGuckian’s role as a female poet. Clair Wills argues in her article “The Perfect Mother: Authority in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian” that McGuckian:

To large extent...accepts Heaney’s definition of the poetic process as the realization of the pregnancy of potential in an object by an external subjectivity; but this romantic view of fusion of subject and object by the imagination is complicated in McGuckian’s case since, as the female, she is the poetic object. (97)⁸

Wills later reiterates and synthesizes this idea by stating that for McGuckian, “[s]ubject and object are fused already in her body which is both the material of the poem and the

⁸ Heaney’s definition of the poetic process is that there exists a divide between rational and irrational with the irrational (feminine) being objectified in the writing process in order to subdue it (Wills 96-97).

means of realizing that material” (97). While Wills is specifically referring to the poem “Rowing,” the “material of the poem” and the “means of realizing that material” can be seen as body-as-language and body-as-pen: the body is both poetic language and poetic writing instrument, the material and its instrument conflated together.

This idea of female body/output (child) of female body as poetic language and writing instrument is complicated by the “phallogentrism” of language. Within Wills’s article, she briefly mentions this “phallogentrism,” but does not go into the theoretical texts in depth nor to the theorists behind the term. Based on McGuckian’s liminal position, both between her role as subject and object of a poem, and between her two languages, English and Irish (as discussed in the previous chapter), the critic best suited for the discussion of “phallogentrism” and the female poet’s interesting position within this space is Luce Irigaray. Irigaray argues that language, as it currently exists, is phallogentric because the current “historical destiny” of the West claims the “phallus to be the ultimate meaning of all discourse, the standard of truth and propriety...the signifier and/or the ultimate signifier of all desire in addition to continuing as emblem and agent of the patriarchal system to shore up the name of the father (Father)” (67). The very language that McGuckian uses to express her position as bodily subject/object is inherently geared toward a gender not her own.

Irigaray not only offers the theoretical framework for understanding how the phallus as signification of desire leads to phallogentric language but also indicates the steps that can be taken to create a space for the feminine in an otherwise masculine language. She writes in her chapter “The Power of Discourse,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, “...the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the

subject or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself..." (78). This "jamming of the theoretical machinery" can occur through two different ways: (1.) Make linear reading impossible and (2.) Create a feminine syntax (Irigaray 80, 134). If linear reading were to be made impossible, Irigaray claims that every part of the writing would be done in such a way as to make the ultimate "deferred action" no longer comprehensible, and by doing so, this would "cast phallocentrism, phallogocentrism, loose from its own moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language...the masculine would no longer be 'everything'" (80). This creation of a new space for a new language leads to new feminine syntax. This syntax would vary from the masculine language because there "would no longer be either subject or object...no longer be proper meanings, proper names... 'syntax' would involve nearness, proximity" (134). This "proximity" and lack of delineation between subject and object means that there would be no strict form of negation. No one thing would exist as the lack of something else, but would rather be the fluid, middle part between two towering definitions. Both of these ideas can be said to apply, in part, to McGuckian's poetry.

When thinking of these ways to develop a new feminine space and language, it is also important to look back to the poets who preceded McGuckian and study how their language does or does not engender a new way forward for poetic language. Heaney's views of the body and writing as being separate from the written product have already been discussed, but there is still much to be said on his views of language in poetry. In her article, "The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," Carlanda Green discusses the thematic element of the feminine in Heaney's poetry. From the start,

Green notes that “[w]hen he [Heaney] speaks of the feminine aspect of his poetry, [he] is referring to both language and theme” (3). This feminine aspect for Heaney is further associated “with the Irish and the Celtic” while the masculine is associated “with the English and the Anglo-Saxon. The feminine is the emotional, the mysterious, the inspirational; the masculine is the rational, the realistic, the intellectual” (3). Later Green claims that, for Heaney, “the feminine principle indicates an otherness about the female” (4). This “otherness” is in direct contrast to what Irigaray argues for a new type of language; rather than trying to decrease the otherness between male and female, subject and object, Heaney’s poetic language only serves to strengthen this divide because the feminine is forevermore the “other” that helps the masculine on its way to greatness. And, as previously noted, McGuckian takes exception to Heaney’s constant use of the female as “otherness” for the object of his poetry, because she, as the female, constantly inhabits this object role without any room for becoming a subject of the poem (Wills 97).

This distinction between the feminine and masculine as object and subject is also the theme of many of Eavan Boland’s poems; however, she attempts to revive the feminine and bring it into subjectivity by causing it to live within the domestic space. Boland, who is most of the time considered *the* female Irish poet, often focuses on domestic spaces in her poetry in order to show that the ‘normal’ spheres occupied by women can also be the subject of important, serious poetry, rather than just poetry that can be written off as trivial. In order to reach this willingness to write on these domestic themes, Boland first had to work through her own issues concerning the definition of “woman poet.” For Boland, “there was a magnetic opposition between the two concepts...The woman coming from the collective sense of nurture in Ireland, and the

poet coming from the much more individualist, creative realm.” (Brown “Stanford’s Eavan Boland”). After struggling with these terms, Boland claims she reconciled the two by accepting “a fusion, a not-to-be indebtedness between those identities: the woman providing the experience, the poet the expression” (Brown). This “fusion” still exists around the separation of the feminine from the poetic, subjective role.⁹ This separation between the masculine and the feminine can be seen in Boland’s poem “Anna Liffey”:

An ageing woman
Finds no shelter in language.
She finds instead
Single words she once loved
Such as ‘summer’ and ‘yellow’
And ‘sexual’ and ‘ready’
Have suddenly become dwellings
For someone else
Rooms and a roof under which someone else
Is welcome, not her.... (205)

For the aging woman, there is no longer a language for her; she is simply the negation of what she once was. Someone else is now using all of her old language, and the power to decide this usage remains firmly out of her control. Even though Boland still sees this stark divide between the masculine and the feminine, she does brush against the reason for an Irigarian feminine language: that opposites can no longer exist and that there would be no more delineation between subject/object and masculine/feminine. In “Anna Liffey,” Boland writes:

Let the spirit of place be
A lost soul again.
In the end
It will not matter

⁹ For a much further analysis of the difference between McGuckian and Boland’s poetry and their own views of feminism, consult Paul Volsik’s article “Engendering the Feminine: two Irish poets—Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian” in *Etudes Anglaises*. 56.2 (2003): 148-161.

That I was a woman. I am sure of it.
The body is a source. Nothing more.
There is a time for it. There is a certainty
About the way it seeks its own dissolution. (205)

In the end, the physical form of the body will no longer matter. Instead, it is the works that remain that will constitute her reputation and her remembrances. This hope for dissolution of the strict divide between male and female is the starting point for the new feminine language in which McGuckian writes.

Although Boland can see the need for this feminine space and language, it is McGuckian's poetry that most closely adheres to Irigaray's two principles for "jamming the theoretical machinery" and creating a new space for feminine. While McGuckian's poetry can be read linearly, she does disturb this reading by creating syntax in such a way that the question asked by the syntax is never answered. Sered argues that "the act of writing for McGuckian is at once inevitably engaged in repetition and perpetually resistant to closure" (274). Sered shows this resistance to closure by analyzing McGuckian's poetry and presenting how much this poetry begins with a negation in order to show the futility of language in describing her own feminine experience (275). For example, Sered uses the poem "Clotho" from *Marconi's Cottage*, which begins "[b]lue does not describe them..." (McGuckian 50). This beginning negation, says Sered, depicts how "[l]anguage fails to articulate the world as she experiences it" (275). This negation instantly makes finding a meaning to fit syntax incredibly difficult, and as such, it obstructs a match to an ultimate signifier or action and prevents a simple linear reading of the text. The answer to the implicit syntactical question of 'what color would describe them?' is left unanswered because there is no way to describe it using the given language.

As for the "feminine syntax" that Irigaray argues for, McGuckian's work

embodies some of the main themes, mainly that fluidity must be present between subject and object. Irigaray classifies this as “proximity” which means there are no distinct subject/object roles, and by not identifying always with one or the other, the space between the two becomes fluid. Sered argues that this occurs in McGuckian’s poetry by stating:

At once aggregate and singular, speaking and fragmented, the ‘I’ of the poem [“Reverse Cinderella”] suggests that while the relation of Subject to Object may indeed be fluid, the Subject and Object positions are themselves mobile: they not only flow freely in and out of one another, they also overlap, switch places, and move to accommodate the possibility of speech. (276)

This same fluidity can also be said to apply to the changing pronouns in “Butcher’s Table.” By addressing both the “you” of herself and then transitioning into the “my,” McGuckian inhabits this fluid role subject/object because she moves from addressing the object of the poem, the “you,” which can also act as subject since she is addressing herself, and then turns back to the actual subject of the poem with “my.” The subject and object are constantly shifting and often interchangeable. This fluidity results in the beginning of a language that is distinctly feminine and removed from the inherent masculinity of the “father language.”

While McGuckian’s poetry seems to justify this new kind of feminine language, the poet often posits herself as adopting the role of “male poet” because she sees the role of the poet as a masculine position (Interview with Wilson 20). When asked about her poems being about the male and female sides of herself, McGuckian responds, “[w]ell, not just myself, but male and female sides of experience...There is an argument going on all the time...between the complementary roles” (20). Later McGuckian expands on these complementary roles by stating, “[i]t’s two different kinds of creativity [masculine

and feminine], pulling against each other, polar opposites. But at times, they gell, and when they gell, I'm happy" (20). While McGuckian describes masculine and feminine roles as being "polar opposites," she also recognizes how they complement, and equally, how they can mesh together. This recognition responds to Irigaray because McGuckian addresses the differences between the two sexes and attempts to write about this difference and sameness through her poetry. Although McGuckian may affect the role of masculine poet, her understanding of the masculine and feminine as two different, yet complementary, roles allows her to exist and write within the proximal space between the two sexes, and as such, to adopt the beginnings of a new, fluid, feminine language and syntax.

3.3 ROLE OF WRITER AND READER

While McGuckian's role as a female poet who must traverse the difficulties in a "father"/masculine language can explain some of the collapse and reversal of subject/object, there is another theme of subject/object that exists within and is complicated by McGuckian's syntax—the relationship between the reader and the writer. The role of the reader is already a tricky one because a reader resides as both subject and object of the written material while the writer of the material presumably inhabits the subject position and thus subjugates the reader to the role of object. Reading a poem also acts in this way because you are reading the poem ('I' am reading the poem) but at the same time, whoever wrote the poem has placed you in the object position because she is writing either directly or indirectly to you. When I write a letter, I write a letter to So-So, and therefore, So-So becomes the indirect object of my action. But when So-So reads that letter, he places himself in the subject position by declaring "I am reading this letter."

For the reader, the subject and object positions are forever cycling based on their roles within the action process. McGuckian's poetry further complicates this cycle because the meanings of her poems are not straightforward nor are her allusions and intertextual references things most people know. While the act of reading is often an act of interpretation, McGuckian intensifies this process by complicating the transparency of her work; the reader is commonly left with the role of becoming an interpreter of a text with no clear or understandable meaning. McGuckian's own writing process and her poetry, however, show that the poet herself conflates the actions of reading and writing together, and therefore, while the poet's oblique syntax makes meaning difficult, the poet recognizes her role within the process of this difficult language and leaves the written word to be at least partially understood by the reader.

As previously discussed, McGuckian's obscure syntax makes linear reading challenging, and while this helps in forming a new feminine syntax, it also makes forming an understanding of the poem for the reader very difficult. Helen Blakeman notes in her chapter "'Poetry Must Almost Dismantle the Letters': McGuckian, Mallarmé and Polysemantic Play" that "McGuckian provides few...footholds through which the reader may procure a sense of stability" (77). This lack of footholds often comes about because of both what she writes about and the way she writes. The subjects of her poems are always about people in her life: "a person that I know and probably someone that I have had a fairly tempestuous relationship with" (Interview with Blakeman 63). As personal references, the meaning of these events and people is not going to compute to the reader. Furthermore, her writing process of reading biographies (ironic considering the said biographical nature of her poetry) and other materials and

then writing means that while the direct reference source is out there and can (and often has) been found, it still complicates the reading process because some of those read materials will not be easily found nor are all of the materials likely to permeate the culture enough to provide an automatic meaning for its signifier language. Both of these items mean that the reader has to take a much more active role in procuring or constructing a meaning from a McGuckian poem.

While McGuckian's poetry requires a more active reader, it signals this by depicting the conflation of writing and reading together in the writing process.¹⁰ The poem, "Grainne's Sleep Song," for example, illustrates a day in the life of a person in a relationship, and how this person starts as an "I" and ends with the "[b]oth" of a couple. The last several lines of the poem show how reading and writing are two sides of the same coin by telling the reader of the poem:

And stopping
In the entrance of strange houses, sudden
Downpours, I began to read, instead of
Letters never answered, well, salads
And love-walks. With a stone from the crop
Of my dark red, seven-by-nine, writing
Pad, I carved some verses I forget from
'Where Claribel low lieth', and beneath,
Both our initials in full. (18)

The writer starts by reading, moves to carving verses already known, and finally, ends with writing something new—the initials. Although this is not about a poet writing a brand new poem, it is the basics of how McGuckian herself writes, and thus, it shows how the readers are always active participants in what becomes of the written message.

¹⁰ McGuckian has stated in a few interviews that she realizes how difficult her poetry can be for the reader. She has told interviewers, "I think I need a special kind of reader with a special kind of attention" (Interview with Blakeman 19).

Within their dual role of subject/object, the readers more fully inhabit the role of subject as the obscure meaning of the poem forces the readers to interpret that which is not easily understood.

Not only can the reader and the writer move through different spheres but also the language of the poems enables movement through different thematic spheres. This movement hearkens back to the proximal space of the feminine syntax as outlined by Irigaray. The multiple spheres in which the poetic language can reside can be seen in the poem “Jesus of the Evening” in which the private (personal) mixes with the public (religious). The poem centers on a couple who are “[n]on-lovers. Too much married” (62). The lovers have been married too long for the emphasis of the relationship to be the sexual component. Instead, familiarity has taken over. During this time, the poem discusses how “[o]ur language / changed to a slowly enlarging interface, / I said it aloud and precious after you” (62). The couple’s language appears to solely inhabit this very personal, private sphere in which their language is beginning to enlarge to more fully inhabit the both of them as it begins to replace the sexual relationship. Their words become the meaningful substitute for physical intercourse. The discussion of their saying ‘I love you,’ “I said it aloud and precious after you,” goes on to connect with “[o]ur strange catechism” in the final stanza (62). The first ‘I love you’ is often an implicit question because a person must then wait to find out if their partner feels the same. This pair of question and then answer follows the general pattern of the catechism. Along with linking statements of love to the Roman Catholic Church’s catechism, McGuckian pulls in more religious imagery as clambering over a tip of land is likened to the movement of the rosary beads: “[l]ike an old town which clambers over / an extreme tip

of land...the bud / of our consciousness scented rosaries” (62). The language, which the couple are enlarging to encompass the “interface” of their relationship, also causes the poem to exist within both the private, personal sphere of their love and the public, open sphere of religious practice.

The multiple spheres in which poetic language can reside can also be seen in the poem “Gaeltacht na Fuiseoige,” which was introduced in the previous chapter. In the poem, McGuckian describes the cells of the H-Block as “[c]ubes of sky-wielded silence” that “yellow the light” (1-2). The combination of “cubes” and “sky-wielded” sets up an intermingling space between private and public because the cubes are sheltered areas that are closed off to the public, while the “sky-wielded silence” that “yellow[s] the light” is likely the breaking of dawn as the sun rises into the sky. This is an image of openness and space that is somehow connected to the cubes in which the light shines. However, the sky can exist as private since the “sky-wielded” can quickly turn into “sky-welded.” This homophone causes the freedom to quickly turn to constraint as the sky is now just part of the windows. The image of the sky as public/private space also resonates when read against Oscar Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol,” which was written in exile upon his release from prison. In the long poem, the sky comes to represent both freedom and restraint as it is “like a casque of scorching steel” and “leaden sky” above the prisoners’ heads while at the same time it is the “little tent of blue” and the “wondering sky” that the prisoners look toward when trying to escape their confinement in the cell (Wilde). In connecting the sky and the cubes to the public and the private, McGuckian connects her poem back to historical prisoners and poets. By constructing a space in which public and

private coexist, without one being more important than the other, McGuckian creates a place in which language can inhabit more than one sphere.

In looking at the implications of McGuckian's writing process and view of language on her poetry, it becomes clear that the most overarching theme is that of a focus on poetic syntax and the instability this syntax produces, and how this unstable syntax can help in crafting a poem to suit the dynamics of an alive and changing language. In collapsing subject/object and making linear reading more difficult, McGuckian not only holds true to her underlying commitment to prove language as unstable but also showcasing a language that is inherently feminine and continues to strive towards a language that moves further and further away from the phallocentrism or at least the lexical stabilities of the English and Irish languages. This feminine language also allows for McGuckian both to collapse subject and object and also to collapse the idea of multiple spheres in poetry. Rather than simply being able to inhabit either the public or the private, McGuckian shows that a poem – that language itself – belongs to both spheres, and as such, this is shown in the poetry, which weaves through these spheres in the same way McGuckian weaves together the poem from the source text. McGuckian's focus on syntax lends itself to an individual poetics than cannot easily be roped into another's simply because both poets are oblique.

CHAPTER 4

PAUL MULDOON'S WRITING PROCESS AND LANGUAGE

Paul Muldoon, while better known than Medbh McGuckian outside of Northern Ireland, is often charged with the same sort of oblique writing as McGuckian. From his first book of poetry *New Weather*, published while still an undergraduate at Queens University, Belfast, Muldoon's poetry has continually confounded readers with its many references, allusions, and abstract/archaic vocabulary (Laird 1). Like McGuckian, these references and allusions have received much criticism for being too focused on making difficult-to-find references rather than crafting emotionally felt poetry. Helen Vendler criticizes Muldoon for brilliantly constructing lyrics but at the expense of emotional feeling, and she also sarcastically remarks, "I haven't the faintest idea what most of these literary allusions allude to, chiefly because I wasn't born a boy in the British Isles, and didn't borrow adventure stories from the public library" (Vendler 1). These two criticisms, both the lack of emotion and the overuse of references, continue throughout several other reviews of Muldoon's poetry. While these two criticisms are also laid at McGuckian's door, Muldoon's version of obliquity and overuse of references varies greatly from McGuckian's. As already discussed, McGuckian's writing process of pulling syntactical phrases from various biographies and other sources creates a poetics that is both highly intertextual and incredibly insular as well as inherently feminine.

Muldoon's poetics differs from this not only in his actual writing process but also in his overall view of poetic language, which centers more on lexical and rhythmic specificity rather than inexactness of syntax. Critic Florence Schneider notes this:

One of the most striking features of Muldoon's poems is the paradoxity of language where luxuriance and precision of expression are undermined by hesitation and doubt. Muldoon's lexical concern with accuracy and exactness is in contradiction with the general vagueness that is conveyed by his loose syntax and pronouns spaced with gaps." (180)

Muldoon's focus is more on the word than the syntax of words strung together, and this produces a contradiction in the poems because the words themselves will be so specific without the phrase seeming to make any meaning or to cause any emotion. This lack of meaning and emotion is where he gets grouped into the same category as McGuckian, because both resist transparency in their work. McGuckian herself suggests the difference between the two by answering a question about multiple meanings in language with the response:

I find dictionaries really depressing. I know Paul Muldoon, and you go into his office and he is sitting there surrounded by thousands of wonderful and incredibly beautiful dictionaries and that is great, but I would hate to be surrounded by dictionaries. I can't open a dictionary. I should, of course, but I like to find a word living in a context and then pull it out of its context. It's like they are growing in a garden and I pull them out of the garden and put them into my garden, and yet hope they take with them some of their original soil, wherever I got them, but I would hate to take them out of the dictionary. (Interview with Blakeman 67)

For McGuckian, the meaning of one word is connected to the meanings the word has inhabited before as well as the syntax (the original soil) in which the word is currently contained. This focus on syntax and its inhabited meanings shows how McGuckian views language as unstable and forever changing. For Muldoon, the word, while inhabiting meanings other than that from the dictionary (as will be shown later), still

gains its greatest source of meaning from the exactness of lexical meaning residing next to other exact lexical meaning; the dictionary is the word-hoard within which he works and digs. Schneider further remarks that “[i]n Muldoon’s poems, the distance between the world and language does not lead to silence. Rather it leads to a different use of language that seems to unfurl from a dictionary” (186). This importance of the dictionary word-hoard can be seen in both his writing process and the way he writes about language in his poetry. By valuing the lexical over the syntactical, Muldoon – who has the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* in a cabinet next to his desk at Princeton – is also adhering to a more exact meaning of language, one in which the language acts a unifier of definitions and points towards one distinct meaning (Interview with J. Wilson). Rather than instability, Muldoon views language as a connecting bridge between differences, histories, and people. The purpose of this chapter is to show how Muldoon’s writing process and view of poetic language supports his overall understanding of the role of language as a unifying connection that both begins and is supported by the very base of said poetic language: the individual lexical units.

4.1 PAUL MULDOON’S WRITING PROCESS

When looking at the archives of both McGuckian and Muldoon, the most obvious difference between their writing processes is the sheer amount of drafts that Muldoon goes through before reaching a poem he considers satisfactory. Unlike McGuckian, who generally writes a complete poem in one sitting with very few—if any—revisions, Muldoon writes a poem “line by line” with a possible rough sketch of the overall format and rhyme scheme, and this leads to multiple copies of the poem in progress (Interview

with J. Wilson). Muldoon's "line by line" differs from McGuckian's focus on syntax in that the emphasis of the phrase for Muldoon is how all the words in the line fit together.

A If not Uruguay, then Ecuador,
A somewhere on or below

B the equator.
B

C
C

D
D

E
E

F
G

F If not 'counterclockwise', then 'widdershins',
G as we use say here in Brazil.

I

Figure 4.1. "Brazil" Manuscript.; Box 21, Folder 12; Paul Muldoon papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

As seen in Figure 4.1, the poem "Brazil" from *The Annals of Chile* originally began as a sonnet, with the rhyme scheme and first and last couplets written out with most of the middle part left empty. By the publication of the finished volume, "Brazil" was expanded to a 30-line poem with a loose rhyme scheme.

Muldoon furthers this line-by-line style by also jotting down words as they come to him. This writing down is only if the conceived idea is "brilliant" enough to remember to write. When talking about his writing process, Muldoon explains:

I would like to think, and I could be completely fanciful in this, that my job is to let it come out however it wants to come, insofar as I'm capable of doing that. My students, when I talk about this, think I'm crazy. And indeed it is crazy if you think of where the poem is going to go. My argument is it's going nowhere. It doesn't exist. It's only coming into being. What's going to be lost? That's not to say one doesn't make a note from time to time because of some brilliant idea. A phrase or an image on a scrap of paper. Matchbooks in the days when I smoked. However, for the most part I'd say if it's going to leave your mind it's probably not worth keeping anyway. My theory is that one should try to get it right as one goes along. Getting it right often means making it look as if it was written just like that, right? But that's where all the work goes.

(Interview with J. Wilson)

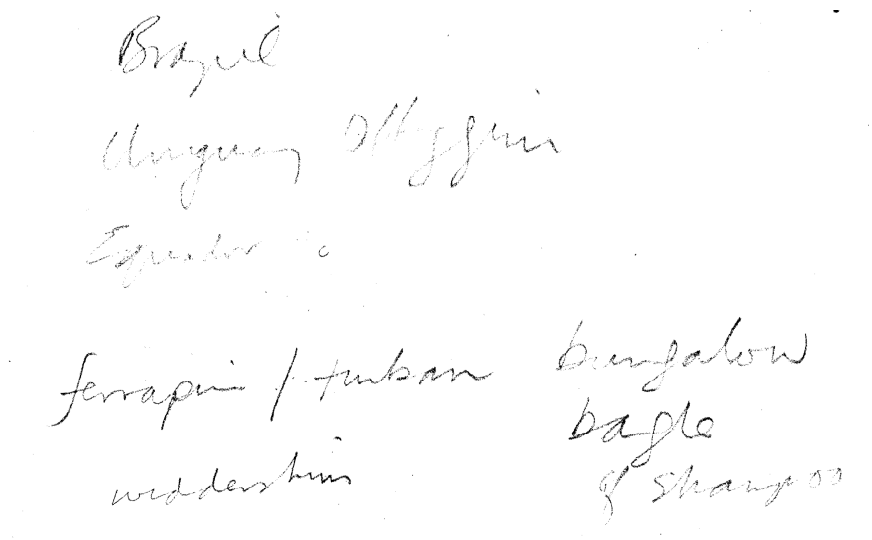


Figure 4.2 "Brazil notes" Manuscript.; Box 21, Folder 12; Paul Muldoon papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Figure 4.2, while a little hard to read, show a note for a poem that was brilliant enough to write down. The note depicts how certain end rhymes will go together and what words need to be included in the final poem. "Terrapin" rhymes with "turban" while "Brazil," "Uruguay," "O'Higgins," "Equador," and "widdershins" still await their place within the final poem. This movement of the line-by-line style from blank lines with a formal rhyme scheme to words-not-yet-in-their place becomes even more noticeable when

looking at the typescript for “As” from *Moy Sand and Gravel*. The original typescript (Figure 4.3) shows how the first draft of the poem begins each stanza with the phrase “As ____ goes out to ____” and ends with “I went out to Joan” then “Jane,” and finally “Jean.”

AS

As goes out to
and goes out to
and goes out to
I went out to Joan.

As goes out to
and goes out to
and goes out to
I went out to June.

As goes out to
and *red* goes out to *Jean*
and goes out to
I went out to Jane.

As goes out to
and goes out to
and sad goes out to sad
I went out to Jean.

Figure 4.3. “As” Manuscript.; Box 70, Folder 1; Paul Muldoon papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

The blank signifies the qualifying words of the statements and shows that while the structure may be the first thing that Muldoon originally writes down, it forms the backbone of the poem with the main source of meaning being provided by the individual lexical units. These individual units bridge the gap from the “as” to the “goes out to”; it

is these qualifying words that act as the unifier between all of the “goes out to.” And while the final published poem changes the “goes out to” to “gives way to,” the connecting words still signify the bridge between the words’ various histories and meanings. These signifying bridges give the poems the emotional meaning that Vendler seems to think is missing. For Muldoon, these signifying bridges are important since not all words are equal. Instead, “there’s only one word for the job, wherever its provenance” (Interview with J. Wilson).

This “provenance,” as previously noted by Helen Vendler, Shane Murphy, and other critics, often includes references to either other texts or sources. Although the research Muldoon delves into in order to write a poem is not documented like McGuckian’s use of her biographies, other resources show the amount of detailed research Muldoon goes into for each poem. In a lecture on T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Muldoon starts by explaining the title’s derivation from Kant and moves into the Yeatsian influence of the poem’s famous opening, “[I]et us go then you and I,” and then begins to do a line-by-line analysis of the poem.¹¹ This line-by-line analysis plays itself out in his own poems, both in the way he writes and the way he references everything from Robert Southey and Samuel Coleridge’s discussed settlement of a utopian community (played out poetically in *Madoc: A Mystery*), to early American history (*Meeting the British*), to Northern Irish and Jewish histories (*Moy Sand and Gravel*). All of these allusions and references point towards the fact that while Muldoon may not have a set two-week period in which he reads books and ‘uproots’ their phrases

¹¹ This lecture was given at the 2012 T. S. Eliot International Summer School opening ceremony, July 2012.

to use in his own poetry, he does commit to extensive research in order to properly place each source and word into the correct signifying spot in a poetic line.

4.2 MULDOON'S VIEW OF LANGUAGE

While Muldoon's writing process shows the focus on each individual word, and how these words work together to form a specific meaning, his individual poems contribute to his overall view of language and its purpose in poetry. Perhaps one of the most revealing of Muldoon's poems about the personal history behind language occurs in "Quoof," the title poem from his 1983 book of the same name that focuses on the theme of language and family. In the poem, Muldoon writes:

How often have I carried our family word
for the hot water bottle
to a strange bed,
as my father would juggle a red-hot half-brick
in an old sock to his childhood settle.
I have taken it into so many lovely heads
or laid it between us like a sword.

An hotel room in New York City
with a girl who spoke hardly any English,
like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti
or some other shy beast
that has yet to enter the language. (17)

The first thing to note is the active position of the word "quoof"; it is not merely a word that resides in a sentence, but is an active participant in Muldoon's daily life. It is "carried" to "strange bed[s]," and taken into "so many lovely heads." By depicting the word in such a way, Muldoon gives vibrancy to language and shows it is an active participant in daily life by its very nature of describing the things people do and use. Furthermore, Muldoon furnishes the word with a very specific definition of the "family word / for the hot water bottle." Not merely a made-up word that can mean anything to

any person, instead, the word serves a specific function within one family and is now being introduced to the rest of the world through Muldoon's poem. In the last stanza, Muldoon cements this introduction to the world by describing the word as "the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti / or some other shy beast / that has yet to enter the language." The word may not have entered into a normal-usage language, but it has now been introduced by poetic language and can proceed from there to a wider audience. The word "quoof" acts a bridge connecting the private family history of the Muldoon family to a larger audience. With its exact definition and usage, the word provides a picture of a personal and family history that gradually opens up to the reading public.

This same usage of specific words acting as a bridge between a private, family history and the reading public extends into connecting both public and private as well as various historical times in "Blaye" from *Horse Latitudes*. The overall theme of the book is one of historical battles (meant to allude to the then ongoing battle over Baghdad in Iraq) and personal battles as the poet's former lover, Carlotta, battles against cancer.¹² As the poet and his lover meet in Nashville "to bear the light of the day / [they] had once been planning to seize," the poems navigate through nineteen sonnets describing both historical conflicts and Carlotta's own intensely personal struggle ("Beijing" 3). In "Blaye," the poet hits upon the changing of terms over time while also conflating the Battle of Blaye with Carlotta's ongoing struggle. The poem begins:

Her wet suit like a coat of mail
worn by a French knight from the time
a knight could still cause a ruction
by direct-charging his rouncy,
when an Englishman's home was his bouncy

¹² For a more complete review, see "The Call of the Stallion" by Mark Ford in *The New York Review of Books*.

castle, when abduction and *seduction*
went hand in glove. (7)

The first image of the poem – her wet suit compared to the French knight’s coat of mail – conflates both the protection a fifteenth-century knight gains from the device and the protection Carlotta receives from having something protect her “proud flesh” (“Beijing” 3). Muldoon uses the wet suit imagery often to describe Carlotta, and within these lines, that image finds itself bridged back to the Battle of Blaye by the distinct lexical meanings of “coat of mail” and “French” and “knight” put together. These few lines alone contain words most often used in past times, (“ruction” and “rouncy,” which mean “uprising” and “horse,” respectively) combined with the more contemporary “bouncy castle” (“ruction” *OED*; “rouncy” *OED*). These words are accompanied by the past thought of “when abduction and *seduction* / went hand in glove,” in which the ‘se’ of “seduction” is italicized in order to draw attention to the Latin prefix meaning “without care”; this is a poignant reminder about the care that Carlotta needs and the carefree way in which she can no longer exist (“se” *OED*). Whereas “Quoof” seeks to introduce the reading audience to a family word, and by doing so bridge the gap between public and private, poems like “Blaye” show how exact words and images can combine both the past and present in order to represent both how times have changed and how some struggles are still ongoing.

While the previous two poetic examples illustrate how Muldoon views individual words and meanings as bridges that can connect and unify things together, the poems still resemble ‘normal’ poems with their rhyme scheme and structure. But Muldoon likes the play with his words and letters, and this playing with words and letters results in pictorial poems that represent the same sort of unifier as the previous traditional examples of

poetry. In his 1998 book, *Hay*, Muldoon takes one word and expands its letters out into a graph-looking poem that produces meaning simply from the way it looks and the small amount of information on the page. One such example, “The Plot,” looks like this:

*He said, my pretty fair maid, if it is as you say,
I'll do my best endeavors in cutting of your hay,
For in your lovely countenance I never saw a frown,
So, my lovely lass, I'll cut your grass, that's ne'er been trampled down.*
--TRADITIONAL BALLAD (15)

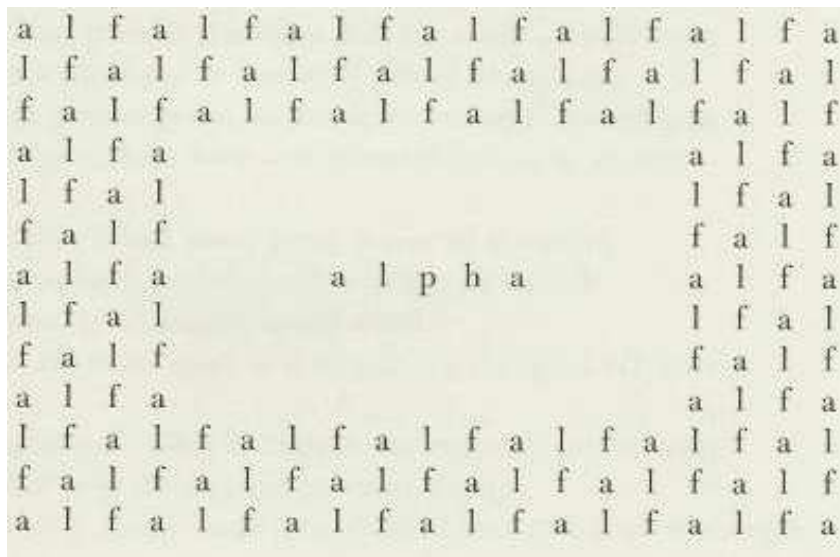


Figure 4.4. “The Plot”; hayinart.com, Ritch, Alan. 2004.

The word “alfalfa,” stretched both horizontally and vertically across the page, represents a field of hay, and in the very center, a partial homophone of alfalfa, “alpha,” rests as the beginning in the middle of a field. When paired with the traditional ballad, which sings about a young man attempting to sway a young virgin to sleep with him, the poem becomes about both a beginning and an ending connected together through the two-word picture. The beginning, the “alpha” (the “fall”), only exists in conjunction with the inevitable ending, the girl losing her virginity, and this in itself is both ending of one age, young maiden, and beginning of another, mature woman. By centering this one word

within the drawn out alfalfa field, Muldoon illustrates how words can build a connection to the things around them simply by being placed in the right spot.

4.3 IRISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

The three previous examples showcase how Muldoon views individual words as being the most important building blocks when building and connecting poetic meaning, but there is one aspect of words and language that the examples leave out: the view of languages beyond English. As noted in the first chapter, McGuckian sees English as the colonizing language, one which she must work within but not the one to which she feels the closest connection. Her fellow translator Muldoon, however, sees the difference between English and Irish in a completely different light, and this difference plays itself out in his poetry. In her article, “The Bilingual Routes of Paul Muldoon/Pol O Maolduin,” Laura O’Connor explains how Muldoon’s early instruction in languages at St. Patrick’s Grammar School influenced his entire understanding of both the relationship between Irish and English and the work that goes into translations. According to O’Connor, Muldoon, thanks to his teachers at St. Patrick’s Grammar School, views translation and the moving in-and-out of languages as wordplay and finding a union between the two languages rather than seeing one language as conquering another. One particular teacher, Sean O’Boyle, influenced Muldoon’s understanding of the “diachrony of language” by constantly making the students aware of the Gaelic and Latin influences still alive in the English language, and by doing so, he showed that “the play of affinity and difference between the three languages revealed the synchronicities interconnecting them” (O’Connor 139-40). O’Boyle further instructed his students on the art of translation, and these translations were a way “to engage with their precursors as if they

were their peers” (138). These two ways of performing translations and interacting with languages other than English allow for Muldoon to move through languages and connect from one culture to the other through linguistically-other words without the alienating strings-attached-to-them feeling that McGuckian exhibits.

This connection with language plays itself out in Muldoon’s poetry in various ways, either by the insertion of various languages into the poem, an Eliotian device as seen in *The Waste Land*, or by breaking down or highlighting the multiple parts that make up one word. The breaking down has already been seen in “Blaye” when Muldoon highlights the ‘se’ part of ‘seduction’ in the lines “when abduction and *seduction* / went hand in glove,” an emphasis of the “without care” prefix that draws attention to the care desperately needed by the people in the poet (7). This breaking down of words occurs again in *The Annals of Chile*’s “Cows,” which speaks to Irish daily life while also alluding to the Troubles and their violence. In the poem, Muldoon writes:

This must be the same truck whose tail-lights burn
so dimly, as if caked with dirt,
three or four hundred yards along the boreen
(a diminutive form of the Gaelic *bother*, ‘a road’,
from *bo*, ‘a cow’, and *thar*
meaning, in this case, something like ‘athwart’,

‘boreen’ has entered English ‘through the air’
despite the protestation of the O.E.D.).... (344-45)

Rather than let the word “boreen” (an Anglicized Irish word for ‘little road’) stand as one word of a single entity, Muldoon dissects the word in order to bring the word back to its smallest parts and connect it back to its original Irish history. By dividing the word into its original Irish parts, Muldoon displays microcosmically the ongoing struggle between the British and the Irish. The Irish words are split into parts in order to make a whole

while the governing British body – in this case the *Oxford English Dictionary* – allows it to be even despite its own “protestation.” In displaying how a word was formed, Muldoon not only shows the roots of the Irish word in its Anglicized partner but also succinctly portrays the conflict going on by simply choosing one word to tie the meaning of the conflict together.

Muldoon’s view of words as bridges that allow for a unification of meaning and translation as way of connecting language and histories rather than as a way for one language to rule over the other can be seen throughout his writing process and poetry. As I have shown, this understanding of language develops a poetics that contrasts with McGuckian’s and also produces a distinct type of poetry that can only be understood by truly understanding the process that leads to such poetic works. This writing process and knowledge of language produces ramifications for the themes of Muldoon’s poetry. It is to these ramifications that I now move.

CHAPTER 5

POETIC IMPLICATIONS OF MULDOON'S LANGUAGE

Since Muldoon's focus in his work is on placing the correct word in the correct line in order to create connections, this obviously has implications for the themes of his poetry and what this poetry says. If words are meant to act as bridges, then they must bridge between things. Muldoon builds these bridges in his poems between languages, histories, and even within the intertexts of his own works and experiences. These bridges result in certain themes rising to the forefront of Muldoon's poetry. Three of the biggest thematic concerns present in his body of work that connect back to this highlighting of individual words are: translation, history, and repetition. Within each one of these three themes, Muldoon uses his poetry to portray how connections can be made using singular words and what these connections mean within the realms of the poems. The first of these themes – translation – is not only its own theme but also provides a framework for understanding the underlying idea behind history and repetition.

5.1 TRANSLATION

In “‘Something Else, Then Something Else Again’: Transformation and Translation in Paul Muldoon,” Scott Brewster seeks to study how translation has worked in Muldoon's poetry and prose (17). In doing so, Brewster invokes Walter Benjamin's theory of translation and how this theory applies to Muldoon's own work. Explaining Benjamin, Brewster states, “translation is concerned, not with communication or

reception, but the survival, the living on, of the original” (23). He explains that for Benjamin, “the ‘goal’ of translation is ‘a final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation’ (75), giving voice to a ‘pure’ language of harmony rather than seeking to maximize communicability or reproduced meaning (79)” (Benjamin, as cited by Brewster 23). In other terms, translation seeks to create a “pure language of harmony” that is a mix between the original and the new rather than simply seeking to make the original understood and communicable, or simply to restate the meaning of the original in another language. Instead, the translation needs to exist in its own right although it will always bear the marks of the original.

Muldoon echoes these statements in an interview with *The Paris Review* when asked about the work of translation. He responds, “[a] translated poem is necessarily a new thing, but it has a relationship with the original. Or, as I’m beginning to think more and more, both have a relationship with some text of which each, original and translation, is a manifestation” (Interview with J. Wilson). This lineage from one work to another, or in the case of the example below, from one language or event to another, always connects things together and builds upon the original product in order to both create something new and to preserve something old. Furthermore, it is within this lineage that the new connections form, and within these connections, some sense of clarity can be reached. In the same interview, when talking about form and content, Muldoon says that “[t]o reconcile the two is the trick, the ready-made and the random” (Interview with Wilson). Muldoon further expounds on this reconciliation when he states:

“I think that the impulse to find the likeness between unlike things is very basic to us, and it is out of that, of course, which the simile or metaphor springs. So a poem moves towards some sort of clarification, and the

creation of a space in which sense, however fleetingly, may be made.”
(Interview with J. Wilson)

Translation, whether it be from one language to another, or from one experience to another, is meant to provide both the Benjaminian sense of ‘pure’ language of harmony and the creation of not just a new idea from the original but also the creation of a space in which the two disparate ideas can reconcile, if only within the body of the poem.

This sense of translation as creating newness and connecting to the original is evident in the poem “Meeting the British” from the book of the same name. The poem recounts a meeting between Native Americans and the British, and the catastrophic results that possibly occurred from this meeting. The poem tells the readers:

We met the British in the dead of winter.
The sky was lavender

and the snow lavender-blue.
I could hear, far below,

the sound of two streams coming together
(both were frozen over)

and, no less strange,
myself calling out in French

across that forest-
clearing. Neither General Jeffrey Amherst

nor Colonel Henry Bouquet
could stomach our willow-tobacco.

As for the unusual
Scent when the Colonel shook out his hand-

kerchief: *C'est la lavande,
une fleur mauve comme le ciel.*

They gave us six fishhooks
and two blankets embroidered with smallpox. (160-61)

Shane Murphy, in his illuminating analysis of the poem, notes that the criticisms the poem received from others such as John Cary – who called the poem uninformative and unable to answer the questions “where is it recorded, and what really happened?” – are, in fact, a mark of the poem’s success at combining both the historical and fictional rather than a mark of its failure (Murphy 77). Murphy continues by stating that Muldoon acknowledges the combination of the historical and the fictional by constantly referring to the color lavender, both in the beginning of the poem and in the penultimate French-language stanza. This repeated use of the color is “reminiscent both of an account given by an actual witness and of a storyteller setting the scene for atmospheric effect” with the repetition also “striking a poetic note, clearly inappropriate for a straightforward rendition of the facts” (79-80). This ‘storytelling’ atmosphere sets the stage for the initial metaphoric connection between the two factions. As the British and the Native Americans meet, the background noise is “the sound of two streams coming together / (both were frozen over)”. This initial connection, however, hints at the harmful alliance to come because the qualifying statement “(both were frozen over)” is a prediction of the current murderous event (the smallpox blankets) and the fallout from this event. The “two streams coming together” is simply a deception used by the British in order to eradicate the ‘other.’ What is happening on the surface of the streams and what lies beneath tell the story of both the present and the future relationship between the Native Americans and the British.

By the time the poem gets to the actual work of language translation, it is fairly obvious to the reader that “meeting the British” will only end badly for the other party. The phrase, “[c]’est la lavande / une fleur mauve comme le ciel,” which translates “it’s

lavender, a flower as purple as the sky,” echoes the original lavender setting. For Brewster, this use of the French language for translation purposes actually goes against what Benjamin originally intended:

The work of the translator here is far removed from Benjamin’s search for pure language: translation is in the service of instrumental communication, and far from expressing the kinship of tongues, this act of translation will lead to linguistic severance and a catastrophic loss of continuity. (25)

While this may be correct when thinking of the ‘historical’ sense of the poem, the ‘fictional’ part of the poem actually supports the harmony of pure language with the creation of the new and preservation of the original. The poem preserves, in a pseudo-historical/fictional sense, what could have happened at such a meeting, and the French language serves as the bridge between the British and the Native Americans, no matter what the final outcome. The poet, who in this poem places himself within the role of the ‘other,’ of the Native American, “calls out in French,” so the basis for the French language as the metaphorical and linguistic meeting ground is established fairly early on in the poem. When this meeting ground comes to fruition, the murderous results of the meeting do not hide the fact that the act of translation was used for communicable purposes between two parties. The ‘fictional’ part of the poem, however, acts as the harmonic preservation of language because Muldoon has imagined what could have happened while also changing the circumstances in order to create something original. The translation of the poem happens in not only a linguistic sense with the French language but also in a historical sense as the historical events are translated into a poetic event. By viewing the poem this way, the act of translation will actually continue to lead to the legacy of the original, as espoused by Benjamin, because it continues to both connect and remove the poem from the actual, historical events.

5.2 HISTORY

This idea of translation connecting and continuing is similar to the way Muldoon bridges his own personal histories. These histories, most often identified with his longer poems, such as “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,” “Yarrow,” and “Incantata,” produce continuous swirls of information that bridge the gap between two or more various histories, even if only in the realm of the poem. While this theme can be seen throughout many of Muldoon’s works, *Moy Sand and Gravel* in particular attempts to reconcile past and present while also dealing with the underlying presence of tragedy and grief. The culmination of this theme of bridging histories is in the final poem, “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999.” The main events of the poem take place the day after Hurricane Floyd swept through the eastern part of the United States and on up to New Jersey, but Muldoon uses the overall chaos of a hurricane as a way to work through the different cultural identities and histories that are present in his young son, Asher. Modeled after the eight-line stanzas in W.B. Yeats’s poem “A Prayer for My Daughter,” the poem seeks to finally mitigate the differences between past and present, but the events all get thrown together as the tumultuousness of the storm provides a bridge for all of the events of family lineage and history to finally combine.

The “Black Horse” of the poem is actually Muldoon’s home in New Jersey, which was once the site of a tavern (Interview with Wilson). The events of “running a household/ in the Poland of the 1930s” and “Irish navvies continu[ing] to keen and kvetch” are all combined with references to historical figures of the past and family ancestors, as well as modern events of clean-up after a storm and the Yeatsian and Coleridgean image of a child at rest throughout all of the chaos. Even Asher himself is

symbolized as this bridge of two histories by not only being the biological result of two different sets of genes but also he is: “wrapped in a shawl of Carrickmacross /lace and a bonnet /of his great-grandmother Sophie’s finest needlepoint” as though he is a physical symbol that bridges the past into the very present (84). Muldoon also remarks that he:

was awestruck to see in Asher’s glabrous
face a slew of interlopers not from Maghery
...
but the likes of that kale-eating child on whom the peaked cap, *Verboten*,
would shortly pin a star of yellow felt. (84)

In the face of his child, Muldoon sees the characteristics of Jewish heritage and is “awestruck” by the visible and animated representation of two histories merged into one being.

Throughout the rest of the poem, all of these personal historical references are also intertwined with references to social and sensational histories as a way to bridge not only the private but also the collective. Florence Schneider notes in “Muldoon’s Palimpsestic Irishness” that “up to his latest books on his translations, his poems have dealt with the links between the singularity and the collective, exploring therefore the role of memories, of the individual and collective constructions of one’s history” (247). One such example of this mix of the singular and the collective occurs in the poem when:

Just one step ahead of the police launch, meanwhile, a 1920 Studebaker
had come down Canal Road, Do Not Fill
Above This Line, carrying another relative, Arnold Rothstein, the brain
behind the running, during Prohibition, of grain
alcohol into the states, his shirt the very same Day-Glo green of
chlorophyll

....

Jean had been fixing Asher a little gruel
from leftover cereal
and crumbled Zwieback
when Uncle Arnie came floating by the “nursery.”
This was the Arnold Rothstein who had himself fixed the 1919 World

by bribing eight Chicago White Sox players, Keep Back

Fifty Feet, to throw the game. So awestruck were we by his Day-Glo
shirt we barely noticed how low
in the water his Studebaker lay, the distribution of its cargo of grain
alcohol. (87)

The lines move from introducing both Jewish mobster Arnold Rothstein (who may or may not actually be a relative) to Prohibition, the introduction of Day-Glo, which in itself ties together multiple decades that found the color a wise fashion choice, and finally back to the somewhat-present with the images of that present morning. “Jean had been fixing Asher a little gruel” once again bridges the past to the present before tying together both the individual and the collective. Since Muldoon introduces Rothstein as a relative, he is an immediate connection to the personal family, but when the lines continue, and Muldoon reveals Rothstein’s role in the ‘Black Sox’ of 1919, the private family relative becomes thrust into the collective sphere of popular culture/history. The collective turn continues as Muldoon imagines he and his infant son seeing the notorious mobster lying in the back of the 1920s Studebaker. The “water in his Studebaker” also refers back to the floodwaters that have allowed for this tumultuous review of history to occur and immediately brings the reader back to a sense of the present.

All of the private and historical bridges are also infused with slogans from different signs such as “Don’t Walk” and “Please Examine Your Change as Mistakes Cannot Be Rectified.” The signs add to the chaos because they heighten the feel that all of the events are within a vortex and are constantly spinning and merging with one another. Rather than offering a distinction between the collective and private Jewish and Irish histories, the signs just further interject a public culture into the poem while also

providing a neutral bridge between the Jewish and Irish histories; the images have all been merged into one form, similar to the merging of the two lineages into one small child. The poem “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999” ends Muldoon’s attempts to reconcile past and present through the use of the metaphorical journey of words and the physical journey of traveling from one place to the next. It is the ending of this ‘historical bridging’ type of translation that has taken the original poetic format from Yeats (who himself echoes Coleridge in “Frost at Midnight”), as well as the original historical events from both family and popular culture, and has translated them through his own exacting diction to produce a poem that both extends a relation to the original and constructs a new meaning of its own.

5.3 REPETITION

The final of the three thematic devices – repetition – can also be seen as a subset often used to connect the previous two concerns. Repetition acts as a bridge in Muldoon’s work both in one poem and across poems and books of poetry. Muldoon recognizes his use of repetition in an interview with John Redmond from *Thumbscrew* when he says:

I believe that these devices like repetition and rhyme are not artificial, that they’re not imposed, somehow, on the language. They are inherent in the language. Words want to find chimes with each other, things want to connect. (Interview with John Redmond)

Muldoon further echoes this belief in words inherently wanting to connect when he cites a Wake Forest University research study done on repetition as showing that “[a]ttraction to repetitiveness is because our brains automatically search for patterns” (Lecture notes). Since the human brain views repetition as a pattern and a connection, its use in poetry is inherently to draw connections both within and through poems.

Some of the examples already used have repetition as one of their devices, such as “As” from the previous chapter and “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999” in the preceding section. “As” continually utilizes the phrase “as _____ gives way to _____....I give way to you” as a way of showing both lineage and evolving history as things continually change. Similarly, “Black Horse” carries repeated lines in it from the rest of the book that contains it in an effort to show how the overarching theme of the work has been conveyed from the first page to the last, and to connect themes and ideas from one poem to the next. In the long poem, Muldoon relates the day he learned of his wife’s miscarriage as his own personal day of *Nacht-und-Nebel Erlass* (Night and Fog Decree) by reusing part of the previous poem “The Stoic” in the lines:

brought back the day
of our own *Nacht-und-Nebel Erlass*
on which I’d steadied myself under the Gateway Arch and
pondered the loss
of our child.” (“Black Horse” 94)

The original lines of “The Stoic” read:

at the thought of our child already lost from view
before it had quite come into range,
I steadied myself under the Gateway Arch.” (“The Stoic” 41)

Later, the poem, “Moy Sand and Gravel,” reappears with the pondering:

than if scouring the trap by which I had taken that peccary, so land and
lean,

by its dinky hind leg,
Don’t Walk, than if, Don’t Walk, than if, Don’t Walk,
than if scouring might make it clean.” (“Black Horse” 98)

The original text reads:

those two great towers directly across the road
at Moy Sand and Gravel
had already washed, at least once, what had flowed

or been dredged from the Blackwater's bed
and were washing it again, load by load,
as if washing might make it clean. ("Moy Sand and Gravel" 9)

The reuse of language from the previous poems, as well as adopting the form used by Yeats, bridges the histories represented in each poem, following the pattern from poem to poem.

This poetic use of repetition continues throughout much of Muldoon's later works and is especially present in his most recent collection *Maggot*. In the title poem, the poet speaks of the death of a relationship and all the things he "used to wait on" or "for," and then moves to mentioning all the activities he currently does "now" (43). In the nine-page poem, words such as "yarrow" and "trout" are repeated often while each page carries the refrain, "where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim." Muldoon writes:

I used to wait while a trout inveighed
against the yarrow corymb
as the birch will upbraid
the fly agaric with which it has a sym-

biotic relationship. Has-been is tight
with has-been.
An ex-Franciscan will plight
his troth to an ex-Ursuline

where I'm waiting for some lover
to kick me out of bed
for having acted on a whim

and quibbled with Miss Trifoglio instead
of taking up the offer
of her little Commie quim. (50)

Throughout these four stanzas alone, "trout" and "yarrow" are both repetitions carried over from the first page of the poem, "has-been" and "ex" are repeated within the same

stanza, the refrain reoccurs, and Miss Trifoglio reappears as well. While the overall meaning of this page has to do with waiting for an argument to pass between the trout and the yarrow, and the writer recognizing the pastness and decay of his failed relationship with the “has-been” and “ex,” the repetition allows the connections to be made from one page to another in order to help form a meaning. By using the same carefully chosen words over and over again, Muldoon forms a strict pattern that helps in producing poetic meaning and emotion by guiding the reader along the repeated lines of the poem and subsequently through the poem itself.

In using words as bridges, Muldoon is able to connect a multitude of things: from people to people, language to language, and history to history. While translation, and its emphasis on the correct word in the correct place, may play the most important role in Muldoon’s poetry, it spirals out into the connection of history and the usage of repetition. All of these themes when combined form the thematic backbone of Muldoon’s work, and it is through these themes that most of his motifs and metaphors flow. By stressing the importance of words and their meaning, Muldoon illustrates how a single word or language can then expand out to be used to provide poetic meaning and emotion. Muldoon’s word-hoard is the origin for all of his poetic language, and this individualistic word-hoard, no matter how difficult the poetry it produces, should not be the basis for grouping him into a simple category, but rather, it should be the start of further in depth study into its effects on his poetry.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Two guiding themes – syntactical phrases and lexical units – serve as the main focus in the poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon. Throughout this thesis, I have shown through critic's responses, archival materials, interviews, and most importantly, the poetry, that while both McGuckian and Muldoon have been charged with obliquity, the understanding of their poetry should not stop there; rather, the underlying instruments for this obliquity should be studied as a way to better understand the differences between the poets and their poetry.

For McGuckian, this emphasis on an incredibly insular and dynamic view of language that lends itself to comparison with the human body, the development of a new feminine language suggestive of the theoretical structure of Luce Irigaray, and to a different understanding of the relationship between writer and reader. For Muldoon, I have demonstrated how his incredibly exacting and dictionary-like view of language causes his poetry to center on those things that require specification: translation, history (both personal and collective), and repetition. Through all this, I have placed importance on truly studying the writer's individual works on a case-by-case basis and trying to view these works through fresh eyes, and not through the eyes of a simplifying categorical approach.

There are, in fact, some similarities between the two, because they both value a sense of personal language, both of their poetic languages deal with, in some form, the

divide between the personal and the private/the individual and the collective, and they both value the inherent meaning, whether understandable to others or not, that comes with the intricate language of their poetry. These similarities, however, pale in the face of the differences seen in both their corpus and their poetic language.

In this study of McGuckian's and Muldoon's poetic differences, an underlying theme appears, and that is the influence of their own personal history and education. These influences changed the way they view both general and poetic language. McGuckian was educated in secondary school by nuns who eventually made her feel "sick of being part of this community that excludes men," and this education also led to her seeing the English language as an "imposed imperial language...a tyrannical force" (Interview with Wilson 20; Mallot 250). Each of these influence can be seen in the way she writes, from her ability to confuse boundaries and thus create a community that does not always exclude the 'other,' to her institution of syntactical phrases that take the English language and turn it upside down in response to her own feelings of being alienated and uncomfortable in her own pseudo-native. This education and view of the English language contrasts with that of Muldoon, whose teachers taught him Irish through English translations and to view these translation as word play or "journeywork," and who was later taught poetry through the New Critical lens (O'Connor 138; Keller 13).¹³ Both of these types of educations play a role in his focus on the individual units – the words – of the poetic language rather than the syntax. They also established in him

¹³ In an interview with Lynn Keller, Muldoon states, "I'm one of those old fogies who was brought up on New Criticism and practical criticism; I believe that one of the writer's jobs is to reduce the number of possible readings of a text, to present something that can really only be read one, two, three, or maybe four ways. The kind of writing I'm interested in is self-contained, or as self-contained, as a thing on the page, as possible" (13).

the knowledge and love of translation, and to not be bogged down by the alienable aspects of language. Overall, these two writers prove that their written works contain their own personal history as much as they contain the obvious difficulty, and through this they are not hermetic, and neither are they solely created from other's source texts. Rather, their works offer valuable insight into how poetry is produced and formed by the individual writer, and how aspects of a poet's life work together in this process and formation.

While this thesis only offers a case study of two separate, but similar, poets, it does provide an avenue for fuller understanding of not only these two poets but also the works of other poets who are reduced to categories rather than acknowledging their specific poetic strategies. The "difficultness" of Medbh McGuckian and Paul Muldoon's poetry may offer an easy category to throw them into, but it leaves out many of the underlying themes in both their poetry and their poetic language. Although this study is by no means an exhaustive look into the works of either author, it does start a conversation about the way to both look at McGuckian and Muldoon's poetry, and the works of other poets who are all too often grouped together under an adjective, an adjective becomes the most important highlight of their body of work. Categorization can be useful, but it should never be the defining feature when studying all that goes into poetic language. What remains from this argument, apart from the developments claimed in McGuckian and Muldoon's work is, instead, a need for further study into how his or her poetic language is influenced not only by the type of poetry he or she writes but also by his or her own historical understanding of language and poetry.

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