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## Shams and Cover-ups: The Spectacle of History in Paul Muldoon's "Meeting the British" and "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers"

By Robert Lesman  
Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

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**Abstract.** Paul Muldoon's poems "Meeting the British" and "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" represent history as a space of reversed allegiances. In these poems, doubling is a constant activity that deceives the viewer or interlocutor. This deception occurs both in the history of British imperialism and in a technological present in which an Irish father and son must make sense of the shifting and uncertain ground of their own cultural identity. Behind the veil of the allegiance lurk obscured differences of both identity and power; Muldoon's poems highlight the importance of being skeptical of all assertions of identity that purport to equate different, opposed and unequal cultural groups. In the end, a knowledge of history is the most important tool for piercing the veil of deception and seeing clearly the working of difference and resisting the deception that is the weapon of those in power.

**Key Words.** Poetry, Paul Muldoon, history, Native American, difference, identity

**Resumen.** Los poemas "Meeting the British" y "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers," de Paul Muldoon, presentan la historia como un espacio de alianzas cambiantes. En estos poemas, el duplicar es una actividad constante que engaña al espectador o interlocutor. Este engaño ocurre tanto en la historia del imperialismo británico como en un presente tecnológico en el cual un padre irlandés y su hijo tienen que comprender su propia identidad cultural, que es siempre cambiante e incierta. Detrás del velo de la alianza se esconden diferencias de identidad y poder; los poemas de Muldoon subrayan la importancia de ser escéptico en cuanto a todas las afirmaciones de identidad que pretenden equiparar grupos culturales que son desiguales y que están en oposición. A fin de cuentas, un conocimiento de la historia es la herramienta más útil para penetrar el velo de la decepción, ver claramente cómo funciona el fenómeno de la diferencia, y resistir el engaño que sirve de arma para los que poseen el poder.

**Palabras clave.** Poesía, Paul Muldoon, historia, indígena, indiferencia, identidad.

History is a dynamic phenomenon in Paul Muldoon's poetry. In "Meeting the British" (from the eponymous collection of 1987) and "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" (from *Quoof*, 1983), the past is a space marked by deception and shifting alliances. In the poems, doubling is the primary force behind the events of history. People and their actions repeatedly team up with paradoxical counterparts in an unstable space where action and identity

undergo repeated reversals. As we will see, language is a crucial medium for these processes of repetition and differentiation. The vision of history sketched out in "Meeting the British" is expanded upon in "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers". The latter poem multiplies the permutations that result from the basic instability established in the previous poem, especially in its enactment of a fusion of past and present. The reversals that Muldoon's

doublings enact underline the instability of cultural, national, ethnic, and political identities. To use Derrida's language, this instability emerges from the reality that ". . . the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself, the person is different from itself" (Derrida 1997: 13). These paradoxes are linked; the difference that irrupts into the unity of the national identity is grounded in the difference that fissures language, a fact illustrated in Muldoon's subtle play with metaphor, doubling, disguise and paradox. Beyond what happens in language, though grounded always in language, the difference within cultural identity can also be seen to emerge from an inevitable process of difference operative within individual identity. The implications of this difference within identity for Derrida are potentially quite positive: the constant play of difference, disrupting "unity", "totality" and "community as a homogenized whole" makes possible "responsibility", "decision", "ethics" and "politics", and "prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on" (Derrida 1997: 13-14). Derrida's concern is focused on the danger of hegemonic unities like nationalism, and this concern motivates his hopeful gesture toward the positive ethical potential of difference. The play of difference in Muldoon's "Meeting the British" and "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" also troubles and questions nationalism, though it does not enclose any kind of hidden promises for democracy nor an ethics of interpersonalit. Instead, the differences that swarm beneath the translucent surface of identity are only to be seen as lies. Doubling is a process that projects itself as repetition or identity while concealing the fact that a crucial difference is in play.<sup>1</sup>

For Muldoon, this concealment is an act of deception and is complicit with acts of power and subjugation. If difference for Derrida seems to make dialogue possible, for Muldoon, it seems only to take the form of the sham. Like Derrida, Muldoon's poems contradict the

<sup>1</sup> With the phrase 'in play' I mean to suggest that difference is relevant, active and consequential, that the context in which it operates at times seems like a game, albeit one with pernicious consequences, and that it is engaged in a process like Derrida's 'play' of *différance*.

concept of *sameness* that is the literal meaning of 'identity', though they highlight the danger, and not just the difference, that arises when, to define what a person is, we must compare her to someone else. Identity for Derrida is a self-sameness that turns out to be a self-difference when it is analyzed. For Muldoon, identity is the false signaling of an equality (in the political as well as its logical or mathematical sense) between two very different elements that results in a cover-up. This equality collapses time and cultural space; a crucial operation of the falseness of identity is the obscuring of history; an awareness of history and the violence it chronicles reveals the falsity of sameness. Muldoon's poems can be read as exhortations toward a clearer understanding of history so that one can avoid the tricks, traps and shams of identity and identification, which are deployed through such systems of power as nationalism and imperialism. History provides a broader frame of reference that allows us to see a supposed repetition as a variation; to use Deleuze's terminology, history is a higher 'law' than the narrower laws of human deception, making visible the difference that this deception obscures: "The constants of one law are in turn variables of a more general law" (Deleuze 1994: 2)<sup>2</sup>. As informed readers of Muldoon's poems, we are able to see both laws in operation when we deploy a knowledge of history.

"Meeting the British" tells the story of a historical encounter from the perspective of one of its participants, whereas "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" evokes history in a number of oblique and surprising ways through an unlikely contemporary situation. Both treat history as a scene where events unfold into surprising doublings and reversals. It is instructive to read "Meeting the British" first, as it establishes a clear vision of history as site of duplicity. Reading "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" second reveals an expansion

<sup>2</sup> For Deleuze, all systems of representation that are not 'infinite' (that is, which do not "ensur[e] the convergence of all points of view on the same object or the same world," or "mak[e] all moments properties of the same Self") do violence to the difference that operates at the core of all ideas: "Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference"; it possesses "a false depth" (Deleuze 1994: 55).

upon this vision from a point of view situated in a more modern present.

In "Meeting the British" a historical encounter is evoked as the scene of a multifarious duplicity. Doubteness is indeed at work not just in the action depicted, but also in the language of the poem itself. The duplicity of Lord Jeffrey Amherst and Henry Bouquet in exploiting the good will of their Native American counterparts parallels imagistic and semantic doublings found in the text itself. The reader discovers a number of paired terms that disguise a contradiction. These contradictions establish betrayal as a pervasive reality in the poem's imagined historical space.

The first surprising doubling is grounded in language, an important element in Muldoon's examinations of history. As Clair Wills asserts, the poem "plays on the connections between trade and language", specifically as both are implicated in a violent betrayal, where the speaker "who has taken on the role of spokesperson for his tribe in fact fulfills the role of go-between and betrayer of his people" (Wills 1992: 139). The speaker of the poem is a member of the Ottawa tribe, who, when faced with light-skinned intruders, calls out to them in French. The speaker himself comments that his use of French is "strange" (7), though from a historical point of view, it is quite expected; many Native American tribes in what is now the northern U.S. and Canada were allied with the French, from whom they acquired certain rudiments of the language. Trade was the force that motivated this process of linguistic assimilation, and as we will see, trade is also a term synonymous with betrayal, as the trading of tongues and of goods results in death for the Native Americans and their natural environment.

The image of the Native American speaking French is doubled by that of another betrayer – Henry Bouquet, a French mercenary who assisted the British army commander Amherst in his subjugation of the native tribes, thus aiding the rival British in their colonial projects. The Ottawa and Bouquet are doubles in that they both assist the "enemy" in some way, and this doubling is accentuated by the superficial similarity that they speak the same language. This linguistic doubling, of course, encompasses the paradox of betrayal.

As the aptly named Bouquet explains to his Native American counterpart the lavender

scent that Amherst's troops carry with them, he speaks the language of cover-ups: "*C'est la lavande,/ une fleur mauve comme le ciel*" (15-16). Lavender is the scent the British have used to disguise the scent of disease that covers the objects they give the Native Americans. As Wills points out, lavender is traditionally used, like smelling salts, to revive someone who has fainted (Wills 1992: 140). The connection Wills signals is ironic; rather than bring the Native American to an awareness of the reality of intentional genocide, the scent deceives him.

Just as scent covers up a deadly reality, Bouquet's statement hides the deadly intent of Amherst's plan. Like his Ottawa interlocutor, he is a go-between, though unlike the Native American, he is conscious of the violence inherent in his actions. Bouquet's statement is a sophisticated construction of metaphoric displacements that invoke a seemingly harmless beauty while moving progressively further from the real presence of deadly microbes. He links the scent of lavender to the color of the flower, and then, via simile, connects the image of the flower to that of the sky.

There is more at work than just a simple rhetorical method of evasion and distraction in Bouquet's explanation, though, as we observe in the speaker's prefiguring of the Frenchman's remarks in his description at the beginning of the poem of the natural scene of the encounter: "We met the British in the dead of winter./The sky was lavender/ and the snow lavender-blue" (1-3). Bouquet's words, as they double the speaker's earlier images, register in the reader the disturbing sense of a rhetorical infection that doubles the microbial infection that is the implicit result of the poem's action. Bouquet's words and those of the speaker form an unsettling double, as the latter, before he utters the words that comprise the poem, has already assumed the language and imagery of covering up, as inherent in his use of the visual/olfactory image of lavender. In the image of lavender-colored snow, it is clear that the natural scene has been infused with an alien color (and implicitly, odor) because the speaker's language has been contaminated by that of the white men.

The fact that the speaker describes the sky and snow as he does signals linguistic and cultural infection, while it also implies a contamination of nature, which is the real

historical effect of the poem's encounter, if we take it as paradigm. By allowing the invaders an economic foothold in the region through trade, the Native American is unwittingly permitting the future process of natural destruction that is the result of European colonization. This inevitable future is prefigured in the poem in images of a discolored natural environment. The speaker has become profoundly allied with the enemy, linked by the powerful and pernicious bond of trade, which manifests itself figuratively in the use of language and concretely in the premonition of natural destruction. As Wills asserts, the concept of the *patois* is especially relevant here –the Native American is indeed speaking a language shaped by the concrete situation of trade, by a relationship that on the surface seems equitable, but conceals an apparatus of domination (Wills 1993: 206).

The infection of language evokes the viral infection that is in part its result. Just as the white man's language conceals a duplicity that is transmitted to the Native American, who then perpetuates it in his own usage, so does the blanket the British give him conceal a destructive force that the Native American will actively (though unwittingly) unleash on his own kind. In the image of the "two blankets embroidered with smallpox" (18), Muldoon offers a concrete double of Bouquet's language. The object is metaphorically 'embroidered' to look beautiful, while that very beauty is the substance of disease. At the end of the poem, what is implied is that this beautiful object will infect the entire tribe, resulting in one stage of a systematic genocide. Again, the situation of trade establishes the voluntary acceptance on the part of the Native American of his own destruction. In the connection between trade and language, it is implied that destructive forces infect the other by being voluntarily distributed, through two different kinds of active use on the part of the receiver –the use of words and the use of objects.

The title of the poem "My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers" establishes a connection between two Irishmen and a Native American, one that is not surprising, as the Native American-Irish double is central to so much of Muldoon's work<sup>3</sup>. This pairing is just one of many that are set off by a chain reaction of textual and historical association in the poem.

Following the model of "Meeting the British," these pairings contradict one another as they multiply, constructing a version of history in which identities are switched and allegiances crossed. In the interaction between the two basic temporal planes of the poem –a technological present (marked by the crucial presence of the television set) and a conflicted past (marked by the ubiquity of imperialism)– Muldoon creates a virtual history which is simultaneously past and present, and in which textual turns make turncoats of each character.

As stated, the title asserts a connection between Irishman and Native American. This alliance has a historical basis, as Muldoon points out: "...the British used Ireland, as it turned out, as a kind of 'testing ground' for the colonization of North America (Keller 1994: 19). In this poem, the two victims of British imperialism are linked in a virtual-reality alliance, as the Irish father and son root for "Our favored wrestler, the Mohawk Indian" (1).

But the scripted reality of the wrestling match establishes a surprising animosity between the Mohawk Native American and "a giant Negro who fought dirty" (16). As historical figures, the two might be allied as victims of British colonization, the first through systematic genocide, the second through slavery. The virtual violence of the wrestling match as it is transmitted to spectators by modern means undoes the indirect historical alliance of Native and African American. It almost seems as if this action is as surprising to the spectators as it is to the reader: "The Negro's breath-taking crotch-hold and slam/ left all of us out for a count of ten" (6-7). The technological present, the arena of the televised spectacle, opens up multiple and fluid spaces in which past and present are forced into the same virtual space, resulting in chain-reactions of signification. Television makes everything (virtually) present, in a temporal and spatial sense.

<sup>3</sup> To cite two important examples, *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990) is built on the legend of a Welsh prince who traveled to North America in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and, along with a group of settlers, was absorbed into a Native American tribe, and "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants," from the collection *Quoof* (1983), employs Winnebago trickster myths.

History and the present moment, actor and spectator are linked in a way that creates multiple permutations of meaning.

Thus, we see how the artificiality of the wrestling match enables an infinite variety of matchups, as the father and son witness a supposedly more logical opposition between the Native American wrestler and “a Britisher” (11) the following week. The fiction of the spectacle permits the Native American to redeem himself; after suffering the “slings and arrows/ of a giant Negro who fought dirty” (4-5), the Native American gets the chance to beat up on the symbolic colonizer: “Next week would see Billy back on his feet/ for one more of his withering Tomahawk Chops/ to a Britisher’s crew” (9-11). The Negro, via Muldoon’s humorous quotation from Shakespeare, is allied with fate, the kind of virtual-reality fate manufactured through the match’s scriptedness. Interestingly, the barber watching the match with the father and son is on to the ruse: “The barber knew the whole thing was a sham” (8). He marks an awareness within the poem of the artificiality of the spectacle of wrestling, and this awareness doubles the reader’s awareness of the artificiality of the narratives of history as he or she glimpses the close connection between the wrestling match and the speaker’s surprising reference to another highly scripted event—the Boston Tea Party. As the chain of self-reproducing meanings spirals outward, our perspective is broadened so that it encompasses the interconnectedness of the shams of popular entertainment and the shams of history.

The reference to the Boston Tea Party at the end of the poem folds back onto the aforementioned alliances and animosities among ‘Britisher’, Native American and African American, re-scripting them in a performance that takes place in a textual space marked by historical and cultural connotations. Again, we are brought into a virtual arena, where the lights cast seemingly illogical shadows across the actors. The Mohawk’s opposition to the Britisher is paralleled by the association between the real Native American and the American colonists who dressed up in the trappings of his tribe in 1773. Both Native American and colonist, in present and past time-schemes, fight back against British

imperialism. The speaker establishes a satisfying irony in illustrating how both the wrestling match and the dumping of tea into the Boston Harbor are shams.

Considering another realm of historical context, though, the “fake” opposition between the Native American and the British wrestlers is shown to be the dramatic undoing of a real historical sham—the alliance between the Mohawks and the British in the French and Indian and Revolutionary Wars (to use American titles for the events, each false in its own way). As is prefigured by their Ottawa counterparts in “Meeting the British”, the Mohawks, under the leadership of Joseph Brant, enter into a strategic alliance with the British. In the French and Indian War, this alliance means fighting other Native American tribes who are allied with the French. In the Revolutionary War, it means fighting the colonists who marked the beginning of their revolt against the British by dressing up as Mohawks.

Jacqueline McCurry refers to “My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers” as a “cultural crosscurrent” (McCurry 1992: 98). Indeed, the complexities that arise from the crisscrossing of virtual and real associations are considerable. The Native American is both opposed to and allied with the British, in the former case via the spectacle of wrestling and in the latter in a historical allegiance. The fundamental technique at work throughout the poem, though, is the bringing together of such paradoxes into a textual space in which they are both seen as shams. Thus, we are reminded that the Mohawks’ allegiance with the British, who had no concern for their welfare, was in its own way a sham, paradoxically parallel to the fact that the real wrestlers have no real reason for violence. The reader comes to see the deceit of the spectacle and the deceit that marks the turn of historical events as profoundly similar.

The historical event in which the Boston patriots dress up as Mohawks to oppose British taxation is also a sham in the sense both of being a spectacle and of betraying the colonists’ lack of concern for the natives’ well-being. The colonists are still “British” in many senses. The crisscrossing thus continues: the patriots symbolically ally themselves with the Mohawks through imitation, though they are

also violent colonizers themselves, who will eventually exterminate the Mohawk tribe. Another historical reality that further complicates this picture is the fact that the Irish, who are allied with the Native American in the title and indeed throughout Muldoon's work, are among those settlers who participate in the genocide of the Native Americans in the frontier conflicts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Opposed to the English at home, the Irish aided their colonial projects in North America. As McCurry points out, "Ironically, Ulster-Americans, who had fled from the oppressive Anglican church and from English imperial rule, helped the British win [the French and Indian War]" (McCurry 1992: 96). The textual alliance of Irishman and Native American is contradicted when one considers broader historical spheres of action.

This introduction of the Irish role in the conflicts in North America brings us back to the Irish father and son witnessing the playing out of multiple histories of allegiance and betrayal in a simple wrestling match. They, unlike the skeptical barber, are taken in by the sham. If we take the father and son as potential actors in the conflated past-present arena constructed by the poem, this apparent lack of skepticism raises the important political question of how Muldoon is depicting the ability of the Irishman to perceive the complexities of historical events, to avoid the multiple deceptions of nationalism and religion. Is the Irishman taken in by such spectacles as those staged by cultural nationalism, or is he on to the tricks? In an arena where certain battle-lines have been drawn for centuries, does he recognize the protean nature of allegiances and animosities? Muldoon answers this question with a yes and a no.

The first answer comes in the figure of the barber who is on to the sham. He represents an ability to see through the surface of events to other layers of motivation and causality. He stands in contrast to his two customers, who do not seem to be critical viewers of the televised proceedings. Yet, at the same time, the barber is culturally ignorant. He reveals a humorous confinement to his own cultural context as he irately asks of the Mohawk: "Could he not afford a decent haircut?" (3). He too is limited in his powers to understand the cultural and historical complexity of the spectacle. In the

end, he represents a paradoxical mix of perspicacity and provincialism.

The second and more subtle technique by which Muldoon gives us an ambiguous answer to the question is his implicit division of the speaker's own subjectivity between the tendencies of the credulous child and those of the reflective adult. The speaker stands at chronological and intellectual remove from the child he describes. His voice is that of an adult looking back with gentle and nostalgic irony on a childhood fascination. This speaker knows the spectacle is a fake, though he indulges his past self's fascination with it in describing himself as spectator. The speaker is aware of the slippages that occur between the virtual and the real, the present and the past, and that awareness leads to a way of narrating his memory that opens up historical and textual spaces of multiplication and contradiction. This speaker is the symbol of an alert and skeptical witness to history, as it reveals itself to be both a relic of the past and a thorny reality of the present.

McCurry asserts that all of Muldoon's poetry that addresses itself to the question of imperialism offers "an argument against *all* identity that splinters mankind" (McCurry 1992: 108). McCurry's comment brilliantly encapsulates a paradox we have seen at work in the two poems considered here. It is restrictive identities or samenesses that set off artificial divisions, "splintering" humanity. In the paradoxical doublings that occur throughout the poems, we come to recognize a more profound human commonality—a commonality of self-difference. Ironically, it is only when his poems allow for the play of difference within couplings that supposedly establish sameness (Native American-Irish, Native American-Bostonian, Native American-Negro) that we recognize that, as McCurry puts it, "Muldoon makes the function of the word the materializing of the hybrid human universal in every place and generation" (McCurry 1992: 97). The identity behind all differences is a dynamic hybridity that collapses cultural and historical spaces into one another in the third space of the verbal text. The implications of this idea are important: identity is dynamic; it allies itself with forces that betray it, and it too betrays other identities that come to couple with it. Cultural identity is never stable, selfsame, or equal to itself. It is

not an entity but rather a movement, a play of difference.

This analysis leads us directly into the waters Tim Hancock, in “‘Mad Images and a Very Fixed Landscape’: Paul Muldoon and the New Narrative”, would warn are shark-infested. Hancock refutes post-structuralist approaches to Muldoon’s work:

Muldoon’s narratives may seem ‘new’, but this does not necessarily mean that they reflect a post-modern sensibility. There is little impression of alternative discourses vying within his texts: this poet’s voice may be weird, but its weirdness is consistent. Rather than reflecting the entropic processes of chaos or deconstruction, Muldoon’s poems are marvels of ornate structure... (Hancock 1997: 135)

Hancock’s comments are helpful in reminding us that Muldoon himself does not believe that the play of difference in his poems spirals into ‘entropy’. Instead, he takes as a central task the *limiting* of potential interpretive permutations through concrete textual boundary-markers: “I believe one of the writer’s jobs is to reduce the number of possible readings of a text, to present something that can really be read in two, three, or maybe four ways” (Keller 1994: 13).

Indeed, one cannot read the figures of Henry Bouquet or the Mohawk wrestler in any way that occurs to us. The way those figures function in the poems is shaped and controlled by history, as unstable as history’s narratives might be. Throughout Muldoon’s work, a knowledge of history is essential to the proper enjoyment of the poem, but this knowledge does not necessarily create a “fixed landscape”. Instead, as we have seen in “Meeting the British” and “My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers”, historical meanings and textual meanings confront one another in a way that produces multiple (but not infinite) permutations of meaning. Hancock is right to characterize Muldoon as a formal poet, though we should not see form as something that puts interpretation in a headlock. Muldoon hopes we will know our history, and if we do, we will understand that both the past and the present reveal complexities that must come into play in the poem. The way in which history collides with the present is a central theme in “My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers”; the formal

techniques of the poem carefully enhance our awareness of this complexity.

As Muldoon himself asserts, “I’m interested in formal challenges that coincide with challenges of content” (Keller 1994: 15). The play of difference in the two poems considered here is always conditioned by the content of history. “Meeting the British” and “My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers” set into play a chain of doublings that encompass differences. This play does not occur out in a wild blue textual open, but within a controlled, well-lit space established by the conjunction of specific modern and historical contexts. Between the poems’ ropes, the “breath-taking crotch-hold and slam” of signification is carefully scripted ahead of time by the poet, with no diminution of the spectator’s childlike and intelligent delight.

In conclusion, difference in Muldoon’s poems, in contrast to in Derrida’s usage, teaches us a suspicion rather than an enthusiasm for the value of dialogue. The barber’s skepticism and the speaker’s critical self-awareness in “My Father and I and Billy Two Rivers” are the attitudes the poems seem to espouse. If identity is really hybridity down to its core, we must be suspicious of any assertion of sameness that might be deceiving us for pernicious purposes. Identity as sameness, which suggests that to talk about identity is always to make a comparison with something else and assert that the two elements are equal, is both false and dangerous. Muldoon warns that there is treachery in doublings, alliances, and matchups. This treachery is threaded into the DNA of the viruses that infect language, so that violence is unleashed simply through assertion. To say that the Ottawa is like the Frenchman, or that the British colonist is like the Mohawk, is to facilitate acts of violence that occur on the page and in the world.

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