Poetic Emergencies: Senses of Ending in Paul Muldoon's "Incantata"

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Abstract. Paul Muldoon's lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford demonstrate a sustained interest in how poems might be said to "end". On several occasions, he returns to Giorgio Agamben's short essay "The End of the Poem" and its argument that a poem's conclusion is a kind of "emergency", a source of anxiety for the poem as a whole. This essay proposes that Muldoon's engagement with Agamben and ideas of ending responds to his own poetic work, and especially to the elegies of his 1994 collection "The Annals of Chile". The essay offers "Incantata" as an exemplar of Muldoon's thinking about poetic endings, situating it within the context of modern elegy to show how a poem's awareness of its own closure can shape its approaches to subject matter, form, and temporality.

Key Words. Paul Muldoon, "Incantata", Giorgio Agamben, Poetic form, Elegy.

Resumen. Las conferencias de Paul Muldoon como catedrático de poesía en Oxford demuestran un interés permanente en cómo se podría decir que los poemas "terminan". En varias ocasiones, vuelve al ensayo corto de Giorgio Agamben "El fin del poema" y su argumento de que la conclusión de un poema es una especie de "emergencia", una fuente de ansiedad para el poema en su conjunto. Este artículo propone que el compromiso de Muldoon con Agamben y las ideas del final responde a su propia obra poética, y especialmente a las elegías de su colección de 1994 "Los Anales de Chile". Se ofrece "Incantata" como un ejemplo del pensamiento de Muldoon sobre los finales poéticos, ubicándolo dentro del contexto de la elegía moderna para mostrar cómo la conciencia de un poema de su propio cierre puede moldear sus enfoques sobre el tema, la forma y la temporalidad.

Palabras clave. Paul Muldoon, "Incantata", Giorgio Agamben, forma poética, elegía.

The central proposition of Paul Muldoon's Oxford lectures, delivered between 1999 and 2004 and published as *The End of the Poem* in 2006, is that a poem's "ending" is invariably a more complex affair than it seems. Muldoon's choice of theme is characteristically flexible – setting aside idiomatic and derivative phrases, the *Oxford English Dictionary* assigns "end" forty-two

definitions as a noun, sixteen as a verb – and this permits significant range across the fifteen lectures. The first of these considers the most obvious definition of "end", pointing out that in reading poems "one might begin, as I just have, at the end" (7); the second and third capitalise on the *OED*'s 1a sense of an "end" as an "utmost limit" to test "the notion of there being 'no barriers' between a poem and the biography of its author" (32); and the fifth draws upon the 14a sense of "an intended result of an action; an aim, a purpose" to examine the work of revision and "the extent to which we may with confidence decide that we're reading the poem we're meant to be reading" (115). The title is also a quip at the expense of the academy: Muldoon styles himself as "a very badly brought-up nonacademic" for whom "the idea of delivering fifteen lectures over five years" is "matched only in its resistibility, I dare say, by the idea of *receiving* fifteen lectures over the same period" (67, 6). It is the monotony of the lecture hall, Muldoon implies, that might spell the end of poetry.[1]

That joke is at odds with the freewheeling method of the lectures themselves, where Muldoon delights in making abstruse associations. He identifies Robert Lowell's influence on Seamus Heaney, for instance, in the poem "Casualty", where

> you find a rhythm
> working you, slow mile by mile
> into your proper haunt
> somewhere, well out, beyond

smuggles Lowell's name into "slow" and "well" (198); Muldoon claims elsewhere, just as ambitiously, that Henri Bergson's notion of *élan vital* refers us to the "*élan*" in "Ireland", Bergson being "of Irish extraction" (67-8). Baffling this *modus operandi* may have been to attendees unfamiliar with his work, it shows Muldoon – a latecomer to the lecture-hall lectern – importing elements of his poetic method into his scholarship. In a 2004 interview, he recounted how

> I was driving home from New York with my four-year-old son and in the Lincoln Tunnel, out of nowhere, he said, "Those lights are like tadpoles," and then this morning he came up with the bright idea that we're like horses. 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. (Wilson and Muldoon)

A "badly brought-up nonacademic", Muldoon in his lectures is led by the same "impulse to find the likeness between unlike things". In scholarship as in poetry, the qualitative, adult judgement on poetic or academic worth is subordinate to the associative instinct, the experimentation with language for the thrill of it; Muldoon has elsewhere described this as a kind of "wise ignorance" in which one is "humble before the power and possibility of language," inclined "to let it have its way with you, as it were" (Keller and Muldoon 27).

As Bernard O'Donoghue says, the acrobatic close-reading of these lectures – or, their "close *rodeoing*", as Muldoon calls it at one stage (195) – is "not meant to be persuasive; [it is] just one way of organising material" (cited in Potts). And organise material it does: in the third lecture, on Robert Frost's "The Mountain", various puns on Frost's name guide the discussion through winter poems, Coleridge, and role of textual "blankness" in the shape made by a poem (53-81). Again, the poetic approach here informs the critical: Muldoon has adopted increasingly eclectic rhyme schemes as a means of getting things written, the "likeness" of homophony often connecting words that – semantically, at least – might have little to do with each other, before

the poem moves to "the creation of a space in which sense, however fleetingly, may be made". Another way of saying this is that, in a Muldoon poem, "form" and "content" are often inseparable, since the "sense" made by a poem is established during, not before, the joining-up of formal coordinates: "if the poem has no obvious destination," he wrote in 1998, "there's a chance that we'll be all setting off on an interesting ride" (Muldoon 46).

But where Muldoon conceives of a poem as a space in which "*sense*, however fleetingly, may be made", he breezes over a word resonant for any student of poetry (my emphasis). In poetics, "sense" tends to stand for the semantic and grammatical components of language which are filtered through the non-semantic, rhythmic, and musical components ("sound") in what we call poetry. We see this in Frost's "sound of sense", in Alexander Pope's conviction that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense", and, as Muldoon's qualification of "however fleetingly" calls to mind, in Paul Valéry's definition of poetry as "that prolonged hesitation between sound and sense" (Frost 80, Pope 10). And in his sixth Oxford lecture, on Stevie Smith's "I Remember", Muldoon quotes at length from a study of that "hesitation": Giorgio Agamben's "The End of the Poem", which was published in English in 1999. This brief but searching essay, by which Muldoon "was beaten […] to the post" for his title, begins by rereading Valéry's dictum:

> Awareness of the importance of the opposition between metrical segmentation and semantic segmentation has led some scholars to state the thesis (which I share) according to which the possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose. For what is enjambment, if not the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause? (Agamben 109)

For Agamben, there is a basic irresolution at the heart of poetry, since "metrical limit[s]" and "semantic limit[s]" are met at different times: a line might end before a syntactical idea is fully-formed (enjambment), or a sentence might end mid-line (caesura). Here, the "syntactical" and the "semantic" correspond to Valéry's "sense", and the "metrical" and the "prosodic" to the sonorous qualities of poetic language more generally:

> All poetic institutions participate in this noncoincidence, this schism of sound and sense – rhyme no less than caesura. For what is rhyme if not a disjunction between a semiotic event (the repetition of a sound) and a semantic event, a disjunction that brings the mind to expect a meaningful analogy where it can only find homophony? (110)

The language used here is decisively Kristevan, recasting the "hesitation between sound and sense" as a dalliance between the functional, referential properties of language ("a meaningful analogy") and its intuited, non-semantic properties ("homophony"). Like Kristeva, Agamben sees rhyme as an emergence of the latter amidst the former.[2] That all poems maintain this suspense might explain Seamus Heaney's enigmatic image of the child listening "to the tick of two clocks": poets are always keeping count of two things at once, neither of which will quite come into step with the other (*North* xi-x).

Of primary interest to Muldoon, though, is what Agamben's argument means for the closure of a poem. Muldoon echoes Dante, via Agamben, in viewing the stanza as a *sonorous* unit rather than a unit of sense, "a capacious storehouse or receptacle" that acts as a blueprint for the aural and prosodic moves of the poem (Muldoon, *End* 152). In a passage that Muldoon does not quote, Agamben opposes this microcosmic structure to the "global unit" of the whole poem, in which *thematic* sense is resolved (110-1). But the end of that "global unit", Agamben argues, inevitably curtails the "suspense" in which the poem dwells. If "the possibility of

enjambment" defines poetry, then it follows that "the last line of a poem is not a verse", since enjambment is no longer possible; "sound" and "sense" finally fall into line and "there can be no opposition between a metrical limit and a semantic limit" (112). The result is what Agamben calls a "poetic emergency", the point at which "sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense"; too often, he, says, this results in the "cheap and even abject quality of the end of the poem" (113). Agamben is here influenced by another of Valéry's convictions, quoted approvingly by W.H. Auden in introducing his own work: "a poem is never finished; it is only abandoned" (Auden 16). A poem's ending can only be suspended, until suddenly it can be suspended no longer; this is a reality that all poems must negotiate somewhere along the line.

The implications of Agamben's argument for elegiac poetry are implied by its title, since the word "end" is always haunted by that other sense given by the *OED*: "the death (of a person); a mode or manner of death." For Agamben, all poems are in one sense elegiac, since their "suspense" can defer closure only temporarily; and this note of "emergency" seems especially resonant in modern elegy-writing. As Jahan Ramazani notes, poems of the genre have increasingly been marked by an "anti-elegiac" scepticism, with the poem seen less as a preserving, redemptive space than its own mark of absence (2). Bereft of the faith that might promise "pastures new", modern elegists can only perfect their art of losing (Milton 75). This attitude is observed by Muldoon at the close of "Yarrow", the sprawling elegy for his mother that dominates the second half of *The Annals of Chile* (1994). The poem's obsessive recording of "memory jammed next to memory" builds only to something

> that I've either forgotten or disavowed;
> it has to do with a trireme, laden with ravensara,
> that was lost with all hands between Ireland and Montevideo. (*Poems* 380, 392)[3]

"Yarrow", which runs to nearly fifty pages in the collected *Poems*, is a testament to the enormous amount of material a poem can contain; yet something crucial, "forgotten or disavowed", is withheld as it draws to a close. The poem thus sustains an awareness of the two kinds of poetic "limit" defined by Agamben: on the one hand, of stanza as a "capacious storehouse", and, on the other, of the insurmountable finality of a poem's closure. These limits are crucial in altering the poem's emotional direction: the ending arrives before the ambiguity of the "forgotten or disavowed" can be resolved, before what has been "lost" can be recovered, before Ramazani's conventionally "elegiac" resolution might be realised. Part of the content of "Yarrow", in other words, is the stance it takes in relation to its own ending.

In this way, the attention paid to endings in Muldoon's Oxford lectures covers ground opened by the long poems of *Annals*. Like "Yarrow", "Incantata" – a 360-line elegy for Muldoon's former lover, the artist and engraver Mary Farl Powers – is a profound meditation how the "limits" of line, stanza, and poem respond to and alter the restorative capabilities of elegy (331-41). It fulfils Muldoon's interest in "challenges of form that coincide with challenges of content" since his thematic engagement with fatalism – Powers died after refusing conventional treatment for her cancer – is to a large degree shaped by the way his poem dramatizes the inevitable "emergency" of its ending (Keller and Muldoon 15). Addressed to Powers, "Incantata" frets over the fundamental elegiac question of whether a departed person might somehow live on through poetry. Muldoon imagines his poem being heard

> wherever your sweet-severe
> spirit might still find a toe-hold
> in this world (335)

and the poem's stanza form implies this grounding potential. Borrowing the *aabbcddc* rhyme scheme associated with W.B. Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "A Prayer for my Daughter", Muldoon recalls Yeats's wish that a poem's subject might be "rooted in one dear perpetual place" (Yeats 148-52, 211-4). The form seems appropriate for the consolatory function we might expect of elegy: it is a roomy shape, and its deferral of the second *c*-rhyme enacts a journey from suspense to resolution. It is the apotheosis of what Heaney calls the "strong-arched room" of the Yeatsian stanza (*The Place of Writing* 29).[4] But the arrangement of stanzas is precisely what *undermines* any claim to endurance in "Incantata": once the poem reaches its middle, twenty-third stanza, it pivots so that the twenty-fourth has the same rhyming sounds as the twenty-second, the twenty-fifth as the twenty-first, and so on until the last echoes the rhymes of the first. Any ballast provided by the "capacious storehouse" of stanza submits to the fixed finality of the "global unit". This is quite different to the destabilisation of Yeats's stanza undertaken in Muldoon's later work: in "At the Sign of the Black Horse, 1999" from *Moy Sand and Gravel* (1999), for instance, the rootedness of Yeats's "radical innocence" is parodied explicitly, the eight-line format becoming a stage for vertiginous historical leaps. "Incantata", meanwhile, remains responsive to the tension Stephen Regan finds in Yeats's elegies, of the poem being redirected "in a burst of energy that also threatens it with extinction" (588).

This is coded in the employment of herbal imagery throughout the poem, which stands both for remedy and decay. Mary's "fatal belief that fate / governs everything", is implied by the devouring "army-worm" larvae of the poem's second stanza:

> Even Lugh of the Long (sometimes the Silver) Arm
> would have wanted some distance between himself and the army-worms
> that so clouded the sky over St Cloud you'd have to seal
> the doors and windows and steel
> yourself against their nightmarish *déjeuner sur l'herbe*:
> try as you might to run a foil
> across their tracks, it was to no avail;
> the army-worms shinnied down the stove-pipe on an army-worm rope. (331)

The poem later remembers how "you'd rely on infusions of hardock, hemlock, all the idle weeds", but the ruefulness of that adjective "idle" is implied from the outset: the herbal remedies are about to be devoured, the "army-worms" invading with mock-militaristic force. The opening of "Yarrow" registers a similar anxiety:

> Little by little it dawned on us that the row
> of kale would shortly be overwhelmed by these pink
> and cream blooms, that all of us
>
> would be overwhelmed … (346)

If the botanical imagery of "Incantata" and "Yarrow" refers to a sense of ongoing vitality, it simultaneously discloses decay. In a similar way, while the ramifying forms of both poems guarantee a kind of duration – consider the organicism, too, of Yeats's "radical" poetics – they also place absolute limits upon it. This is implied by Muldoon's observation that, in the rhymes of "Yarrow", "on the one hand there's the wonderful chanciness and randomness of things, and on the other hand there's a terrifying predictability" (Redmond and Muldoon). This paradox informs the emotional content of both poems: while the "chanciness" of Muldoon's rhyming is partly what allows disparate memories to proliferate from stanza to stanza, led by homophony's

tendency to find the "likeness between unlike things", the palindromic arrangement of those rhymes ensures that the "terrifying predictability" of the poem's ending is always attendant.

For Muldoon, then, as for Agamben, a poem is shaped by its responsiveness to opposing dictates: spontaneity and inevitability, abundance and finality. This may go some way to explaining why Muldoon's elegies – which naturally take these tussles as subject matter – often see him questioning the function of poetry. In "Incantata", as soon as he entertains the idea of his poem as "a toe-hold / in world", he retreats immediately:

> You'd be aghast at the idea of your spirit hanging over this vale
> of tears like a jump-suited jump-jet whose vapour-trail
> unravels a sky: for there's nothing, you'd say, nothing over
> and above the sky itself, nothing but cloud-cover
> reflected in a thousand lakes (335-6)

These are the poem's twentieth and twenty-first stanzas, arriving just before the poem starts to count backwards to its beginning. Formally as well as emotionally, then, they represent a point of resolution, the moment at which endings are realised as fixed, inescapable. That inescapability is only deepened by the echoing of the poem's opening: Mary's disavowal of anything "over / and above the sky itself" seems an inevitable fulfilment of "the army-worms / that so clouded over the sky at St Cloud", St Cloud being both Mary's birthplace and where the poem first remembers her. In implying this fatalistic connection between birth and death, Muldoon renews his long-standing interest in nominative determinism. The sudden disappearance of Brownlee in the titular poem of *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) is explained by his name: as Muldoon has explained in interview, it implies exhausted possibilities, "a brown lee, a ploughed field" (Donaghy 84). But while Brownlee's departure seems to promise a new life, his horses left "Shifting their weight from foot to / Foot, and gazing into the future", Mary's departure itself seems fixed from the beginning (*Poems* 84). The prosodic resonance of something moving "from foot to / Foot" speaks to the promise of poetry; but the passage of time in the later poem seems only to lead to "terrifying predictability".

Instead of anything "above the sky itself", all Mary sees is "cloud-cover / reflected in a thousand lakes", and here Muldoon implies his own formal method: having no other recourse in the face of insurmountable ending, all that can be done is to replicate and repeat. So, as its rhyme scheme is "reflected" back on itself, so does "Incantata" exhaust itself in a flurry of repetition and recollection from its midway point. This is initiated by the poem's middle, twenty-third stanza, where Muldoon is left

> trying to make sense of the "*quaquaqua*"
> of that potato-mouth; that mouth as prim
> and proper as it's full of self-opprobrium,
> with its "*quaquaqua*", with its "quoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiq". (336)

The stanza frets over the poem's ability to fulfil the demand of conventional elegy: to wrest some kind of sense from a grief that seems beyond words. The only stanza in the whole poem whose rhymes are not repeated by another, it stands in the centre of "Incantata" as a reference-point for the rest of the poem, as, for the remaining twenty-two stanzas, Muldoon obsessively lists what has been lost to that inarticulacy:

> That's all that's left of the voice of Enrico Caruso
> from all that's left of an opera-house somewhere in Matto Grosso,
> all that's left of the hogweed and horehound and cuckoo-pint,

> of the eighteen soldiers dead at Warrenpoint,
> of the Black Church clique and the Graphic Studio claque (336)

Nearly all readings of "Incantata" identify that this furious recording of the past aims at the central question of elegy-writing: whether poems can preserve for their subjects "a toe-hold / in this world" or, in Ramazani's "anti-elegiac" mode, simply register loss in all its enormity. But many, implicitly or otherwise, conclude that Muldoon comes down on the side of the former. For Ruben Moi, the fervour of Muldoon's remembering "indicate[s] how the indefinable space of loss can be overcome by creativity" ("Alternative Memories" 124-5); Wit Pietrzak argues that it sees the dead "revived in an ongoing act of incorporation into the living body of poetry" (361); and for Tim Kendall, "Incantata" "demurs from Mary's [deterministic] argument", since "its emotive conclusion grants a moment of communion with the dead" (218). That "emotive conclusion" occurs when Muldoon's list of memories comes to "the furrows from which we can no more deviate // than they can from themselves", at which point a new list opens within it, each item completing the simile "than…":

> than that Lugh of the Long Arm might have found in the midst of *lus*
> *na leac* or *lus na treatha* or *Frannc-lus*,
> in the midst of eyebright, or speedwell, or tansy, an antidote,
> than that this *Incantata*
> might have you look up from your plate of copper or zinc
> on which you've etched the row upon row
> of army-worms, than that you might reach out, arrah,
> and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink. (341)

As we have seen, "Incantata" arrives at a kind of resolution halfway through, and its entire second half reads as a deferral of this inevitable ending, something of which the reader is reminded by the successive repetitions of "of" and "than that". As a result, the emotional confrontation managed by these lines is undersold by Kendall: the poem does not "demur from Mary's argument" precisely because its "communion with the dead" is realised as entirely "momentary". To invert Moi's proposition, the power of this ending derives from the admission that creativity is about to be overcome by the loss of the poem's "living body", of Mary's last "toe-hold / in this world". The poem thus fulfils Muldoon's ideal of the poem as "a space in which sense, *however fleetingly*, may be made": while programmatic poetic forms are amenable to the elegist in giving shape to the "quaquaqua" of grief, it is their programmatic nature, too, which places insurmountable limits on that consolation (my emphasis).

The more optimistic readings of "Incantata" tend to refer to its "circular shape" or "circular fashion", the way it "ends by coming full circle" (Twiddy 19; Moi, *Language of Poetry* 220; McDonald 183). But circularity implies a degree of return, of perpetuity, that this ending does not admit. Although it does close on its opening rhyme-sounds, the first and last stanzas are the *furthest apart* of any corresponding stanzas in the entire poem. "Incantata" thus enacts a process of separation as well as one of return, and in so doing interrogates the reflexiveness of its own form. Muldoon's complex rhyme scheme does find the "likeness between unlike things" in allowing his far-flung memories of Mary to resonate with one another, but it also reflects the degree to which coherence becomes less and less tenable as time passes. The defining shape of this poem is not the circle but the palindrome, something contained in microcosm by the closing image of Mary "tak[ing] in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink". This returns us to another construction at the heart of "Incantata":

> even the car hijacked
> that morning in the Cross,
> that was preordained, its owner spread on the bonnet
> before being gagged and bound or bound
> and gagged, that was fixed like the stars in the Southern Cross. (336)

The chiasmus of "gagged and bound or bound / and gagged" splits the identical rhymes of "Cross" and "Cross" to deepen the sense of being "bound". That this closes the poem's twenty-second stanza – that is, just before the stanza on which the rhymes pivot – indicates further the degree to which Mary's determinism informs the "fixed" structure of the poem itself, a determinism that even the closing image cannot outswim. There, we arrive at Agamben's "poetic emergency", where "sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense" and the momentum of rhyme can be sustained no longer. The "hand stained with ink" on which "Incantata" closes reminds us that the poem's composition – like the process of grieving itself – has been a prolonged struggle against finality.

Grief, as it appears in "Incantata", involves a frantic search for some kind of perpetuity in the face of mortality. As we have seen, this is enacted by the poem's almost compulsive rhyming patterns and its obsession with circularity. But "Yarrow" pursues these patterns to an even greater extreme, and relates poetic form to emotional crisis even more explicitly. It comprises 144 sections – each of which adopts one of twelve sets of rhyming sounds – followed by a two-part envoi.[5] These rhyming sets are the "twelve intercut, exploded sestinas" to which Muldoon refers in explaining his form, and they reoccur randomly up until the middle stanza, after which – as in "Incantata" – the order of patterns doubles back on itself, eventually ending on the first (Ingersoll and Savel). After the 144th section, the envoi begins:

> In a conventional tornada, the strains of her *"Che sera, sera"*
> or "The Harp that once" would transport me back
> to a bath resplendent with yarrow
>
> (it's really a sink set on breeze- or cinder-blocks):
> then I might be delivered
> from the rail's monotonous "alack, alack";
>
> in a conventional envoy, her voice would be ever
> soft, gentle and low
> and the chrism of milfoil might over-
>
> flow
> as the great wheel
> came full circle (391)

This passage needs quoting in full, since it demonstrates Muldoon's incorporation of the rhyming sounds – the envoi repeats all of them – into *terza rima*. That form undercuts what Muldoon has elsewhere called the "obsession" of the sestina's repetitions, since its anticipatory middle rhyme insists on an equally obsessive *forward* momentum (Redmond and Muldoon). Just as the "trireme" of the poem's conclusion cannot complete the "rowing home to haven" undertaken in Muldoon's source poem, the envoi of "Yarrow" is ultimately unable to "transport me back".[6] As in "Incantata", a sense of the poem as a "great wheel" somehow beyond linear time seems an unattainable ideal. Much of *Annals* returns to this problem: its title derives from the poem "Brazil", where Terence O'Higgins is imagined expunging "widdershins" and

"deasil" – meaning counter-clockwise and clockwise respectively – from "the annals of Chile" (328). The futility of that exercise is realised more painfully in the two long elegies, but the "arrow that flieth by day" – as it appears again and again throughout "Yarrow" – is nevertheless perceptible in their acknowledgement of duration and inexorability.

In fact, the emotive power of "Incantata" is heavily reliant on that acknowledgement. The poem's fretful recording of "memory jammed next to memory", as implied by the image of the "ink-stained hand", is all the more poignant for the inevitably of its ending. The salve offered by writing is both temporary and illusory, something underscored by the poem's frequent references to its own artificiality. That closing image draws on Muldoon's version of César Vallejo's "Testimony" (343-4), another short poem from *Annals*. There, forecasting his own death "on a day the rain's been coming down hard", the poet decides that "it'll be like today, a Thursday: a Thursday on which, as I make / and remake this poem, the very bones / in my forearms ache." This also reappears at the close of "Yarrow" to foreground poetry's status as a something made and remade, and responds to the root of "poetry" in the Greek *poesis*, a "thing made or created" (392; *OED*). Muldoon acknowledges this in a 1996 interview, where he tells John Redmond that

> all poetry is in a sense artificial: at its root is the idea of artifice: at its root is the idea of artifice, something which is made in this world, something which is constructed. But at the same time one wants to give the impression that it arises naturally, that it is made, as it were, of natural fibres. (Redmond and Muldoon)

The notion of artificiality reappears in an oft-quoted passage from "Incantata", where Mary is said to have

> detected in me a tendency to put
> on too much artificiality, both as man and poet,
> which is why you called me "Polyester" or "Polyurethane". (334)

This is often seized upon as slip of Muldoon's mask: it shows the poet honestly confronting "nihilism" or reveals "unusually unconcealed intimate details and private memories of personal traits" (Duhig 48; Moi, *Language of Poetry* 211). But it is not so: as Muldoon relays to Redmond, that admission is "actually something which she never said to me; they're words I've put in her mouth." The admission of artificiality, then, it *itself* artificial. Muldoon implies that poetry's relationship to the truth is inescapably shaky and, as a result, that sincerity is its most acute dishonesty. This, surely, is one of the reasons that Mary's "toe-hold / in this world" is refused: "Incantata" raises an ethical objection to artificially-furnished consolation. In considering its status as "a monument to the human heart / that shines like a golden dome", a passage reminiscent of the "hammered gold and gold enamelling" of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", the poem accordingly realises "eternity" as "artifice", aware always of "what is past, or passing, or to come" (217-8).

The self-consciousness of that artificiality invites us to consider "Incantata" less as poem about personal grief than about *how* poetry is made while grieving. On several occasions, the poem references artistic production directly:

> I thought again of how art may be made, as it was by André Derain,
> of nothing more than a turn
> in the road where a swallow dips into the mire
> or plucks a strand of bloody wool from a strand of barbed wire
> in the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden

and builds from the pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt,
a monument to the human heart
that shines like a golden dome above roofs rain-glazed and leaden. (335)

Muldoon tacitly aligns his own work with Derain's: "turn" returns us to the Latin root of "verse", *vertere* – meaning "to turn" – and its attendant metaphor of a plough turning towards a new "line" of furrow (*OED*). Muldoon accentuates this by following "turn" with a line break, the same move he identifies as formally significant to Edward Thomas's "As the Team's Head Brass" in his sixth Oxford lecture (*End* 145-6). In fleshing out that discussion of Thomas, Muldoon rehearses Agamben's argument that the etymology of "verse" speaks to its status as "a unit that finds its *principum individuationis* only at the end, that defines itself only at the point at which it ends", and "Incantata" seems also to identify turnings with endings (Muldoon, *End* 145). One of the "lost" things of the poem's second half is

the stretch of road somewhere near Urney
where Orpheus was again overwhelmed by that urge to turn
back and lost not only Eurydice but his steel-strung lyre. (337)

The presence of Orpheus alerts us to the fact that poethood is being examined, something only underlined by fact that "turn" is again placed at the end of the line. And sure enough, these lines imply the whole imaginative method of the poem: in "turn[ing] / back" to examine memory after memory of his time with Mary, "Incantata" gradually realises that she is no longer there; "turn" in this sense also encompasses the formal pivot of the middle stanza, after which the poem can only catalogue all that has been lost. Elsewhere, Muldoon has spoken of the volta or "turn" as something "fundamental to the thought process of the sonnet", and it appears just as fundamental to the thought process of "Incantata" (Keller 25).

Still, the argument that the poem guarantees for Mary a "a toe-hold / in this world" persists. For Pietrzak, the elegies of *Annals* are capable of "lifting the deceased onto a textual plane where the speaker and the dead can re-establish contact" (362). Mentioning Muldoon's "sense of the poem as an autonomous creature, one which, as it bucks and bounds and comes into being under them, remains intact" – taken from his eighth Oxford lecture (*End* 219) – Pietrzak decides that Muldoon "contrives to breathe textual life into the women close to his heart" (363). But these references to the "textual" indicate a good deal of faith placed in the poem as a stable object, the "capacious storehouse" in which the spirit of the departed person might endure. Pietrzak seems to want to read Muldoon in line with conventional elegy: where Milton claims that Shakespeare endures in the "live-long monument" of his work, so might Mary in Muldoon's "monument to the human heart" (24). But while poems do endure in the sense that they sit in books and wait for us, Muldoon is at great pains to remind us that they are also temporal creatures, not simply seen but *heard*, and heard *in time*. The title of "Incantata" directs us to the Latin *incantare* – "to chant, make incantation, charm, enchant, bewitch" – as well as to *cantata*, a word derived from the Italian for "a thing sung, a song, a composition, set to music" (*OED*). This distinction is important, since the aural qualities of a poem – prosody, homophony, rhyme – are those that mark its duration. As early as *New Weather* (1969), with the "sermons / ending in the air" of "Clonfeacle", Muldoon has shown an interest the fleeting quality of spoken language, and it is no coincidence that the abovementioned lines are some of the most lyrical in "Incantata" as a whole (12-3). Where Muldoon painfully relinquishes the poem as "a monument to the human heart / that shines like a golden dome among roofs rain-glazed and leaden", the reader is likely to perceive the rhymes between "hurt" and "heart" and "Culloden" and "leaden"; the assonantal double-stress of "rain-glazed"; the alliteration between "roof" and "rain"; and the thread of /l/ sounds running through "like", "golden", "glazed" and

"leaden". The moment the language is at its most sonorous, in other words, is the moment at which "the hands fly by on the alarm clock" (336), as "Yarrow has it", at which the poem realises its own temporality.

In a similar way, the claims of "Yarrow" to be a "great wheel" are complicated by how it tracks its own duration. As Kendall observes, the "clock / on the VCR" changes from "1:43" to "1:49" over the course of the poem, as though to remind us of time's relentless, linear progress even when Muldoon is making his anachronistic loops (230-1). The notion that poetry is essentially bound by time reappears in the Oxford lectures: Muldoon's final address quotes Jean Baudrillard's argument that "the poetic form is not far removed from the chaotic form … Poetic language also lives with predestination, with the imminence of its own ending" (357). In "Incantata", poetry's unique formal relationship with "predestination" is another source of anguish, since it puts further distance between Muldoon and Mary. As a painter and print-maker, her art is not apprehended sequentially, and consequently does not live and die as a poem might be said to do. The opening of "Incantata", which finds Muldoon making a mould for printing – "I X-Actoed from a spud the Inca / glyph for a mouth" – hopes that this gap might be closed, that some indelible impression might be made; but, as we have seen, the poem comes to realise its status as something riding on its own melting.

"Incantata", then, ultimately resists considering itself as some enduring "textual plane". This is unsurprising, since Muldoon's conviction – and he is notoriously reticent when it comes to poetic principles – is that encountering a poem is a contingent event, its own temporal experience. This is what he means where he describes a poem as "an autonomous creature, one which, as it bucks and bounds and comes into being" for the reader. In qualifying that statement, he suggests that

> as a reader, I am standing in for the "writer" of the poem. I am shadowing him or her in that first process determining, *from word to word and from line to line*, the impact of those lines. To the extent that I might be described as a "stunt-writer", the person through whom the person was written was a "stunt-reader", standing in for subsequent readers. (*End* 218; my emphasis)

This description of writing as an interpretive process, rather than straightforwardly generative one, sees Muldoon rehearsing the distinction between knowingness and unknowingness that he makes elsewhere.[7] It reminds us, too, of his claim that writing poetry is primarily responsive: once he has found "like likeness between unlike things", the poet works, as it were, backwards, hoping to find "a space in which sense, however fleetingly, might be made." For Muldoon, this active and provisional understanding of how we make sense of a poem, as it "bucks and bounds" beneath us, applies as much to the "wise ignorance" of writing as to reading. He remembers that writing "Incantata" "was almost like a demonic possession – whatever that is, what I imagine that to be. It sort of took over and I wrote it in three days, morning, noon and night. I was exhausted by it" (Brennan). The need for an elaborate formal structure to make sense of loss is palpable within the poem; but the "turn" of form and the countdown it initiates seem to demand a rethinking of how it might commemorate and remember. The traceable arc of that "thought process" is surely what has made the poem so amenable to different media: in 2011, a musical interpretation was performed by the St Louis Symphony Orchestra, and 2018 saw an adaption of "Incantata" for the stage, leaving Muldoon "delighted that it's being performed" (McBride).

The references to the VCR in "Yarrow" return us to a figure who reappears throughout "Incantata": the titular character of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). In that play, Krapp has catalogued his adult life in boxes and boxes of voice recordings, the last of which ends with a moment of intimacy on a windy jetty: "I lay down across her with my face in her

breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side" (223). "Incantata" initially seeks to preserve the past with its own frantic urgency but, like Beckett's play, ends with an admission that the effort to record "memory / jammed up next to memory" will inevitably pass into the ceaseless "moving" of time. This is, of course, the basic "poetic emergency" identified by Agamben. But one of the most significant ways in which poems negotiate this, Agamben says, is to "fall, rhymed, into silence … as if the verse at the end of the poem, which was now to be irreparably ruined in sense, linked itself closely to its rhyme-fellow and chose to dwell with it in silence" (114-5). Attendance to silence seems a crucial feature of how modern elegists – often lacking faith in something "above the sky itself" – avoid the "cheap and even abject" conclusion. We see this among Muldoon's contemporaries: in his "Clearances" sequence, Heaney negotiates his post-religious unbelief by valorising absence and silence, the last poem ending on "A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for" (*The Haw Lantern* 32). In a different way, the Holocaust elegies of Michael Longley's *Gorse Fires*, which appeared just three years before Muldoon's *Annals*, zero in on what the poem cannot say as much as what it can, the two-line "Terezín" stating: "No room has ever been as silent as the room / Where hundreds of violins are hung in unison" (186). In these examples, the ultimate limit of the poem's closure is met deferentially, in acknowledgement of something wilfully "forgotten or disavowed". "Incantata" ends on a similar note. Muldoon's admission that his poem is as likely to have Mary "take in [her] ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink" as the furrows are to "deviate […] from themselves" absorbs the etymological link between the furrow and the poem to suggest that each is as confined and limited as the other. Immediately, the poem proves itself right: in returning to its first rhymes, it falls back into the silence from which it emerged.

Notes

[1] See Alonso (2019) for a sustained enquiry into how Muldoon's Oxford lectures aim as much "to unsettle academic audiences as to impress them."
[2] See Julia Kristeva's distinction between the "semiotic" and "symbolic", in *The Kristeva Reader* 93-8.
[3] All citations of Paul Muldoon's poetry refer to this volume.
[4] The metaphor of the "capacious storehouse" draws on the Italian *stanza*, meaning "stopping place, room" (*OED*).
[5] The first pattern, for instance, uses the rhyming words "row", "pink", "us", "da", "arm", "fly-wheel", "tarp", "oil", "rare", "*Deo*", "stream", and "land". The next time this pattern reoccurs – albeit in a different order – is in the ninth poem, where the rhyme words are "eland", "bobolink", "*Arrow*", "Dada", "video", "peel", "metacarp-", "talus", "rare", "foil", "seams", and "farm". That particular pattern has twelve-rhyming sounds, but the eleven others have either six or nine. For detailed explanations of the structure of "Yarrow", see Wills 180, and Moi, *Language of Poetry* 220.
[6] Muldoon borrows his image of the trireme from the "Quinquireme of Nineveh" of John Masefield's "Cargoes" (*Sea-fever* 19).
[7] See "Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*", and Muldoon's description of his contradictory insistence on "the primacy of unknowing" and "almost total knowingness on the part of the poet as first reader" (127).

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