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Toward a Northern Irish Pastoral: Reading the Rural in Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon

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TOWARD A NORTHERN IRISH PASTORAL:
READING THE RURAL IN SEAMUS HEANEY AND PAUL MULDOON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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When I came to Louisiana State University in the fall of 2010 to begin this program, my daughter, Lola Ann, was five weeks old. In many ways, the experience of obtaining a graduate degree has been much like that of parenting. Whether at work or at home, the last four years of my life have been all-consuming adventures, journeys populated by joy, terror, frustration, laughter, doubt, happiness, and profound good fortune.

This dissertation, this degree, and everything I do—it is for you, Lola, always.

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is three-fold: to mount a comparison of Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, arguing that the two poets actually share much in common, particularly in their use of the pastoral mode; to argue that the pastoral mode offers a provocative, even radical platform for postcolonial writing and thinking; and to argue that reading Heaney and Muldoon, and Ireland in general, as postcolonial offers much for critics and scholars.

This project looks particularly at Heaney's use of gender in landscape to argue that Heaney relies on an abject pastoral mode, one which is dominated by excess fertility and dangerous maternity, to portray an Irish landscape that is both colonially scarred and potentially radically anti-colonial. These readings stretch from Heaney's early pastoral poems to his famous sequence of bog poems and through to his much more recent eclogues, and in each instance this project seeks to bring a discussion of gender to the fore—thus making an intervention into the existing scholarship, which often overlooks or elides these concerns.

The latter chapters focus on Paul Muldoon's poems, arguing that Muldoon's pastoral poems use the pastoral as a platform for writing about Irish cultural tropes and stereotypes. This project divides Muldoon's pastoral poems into two groups: the first, his pastoral performances, are marked by his use of the pastoral as a setting from which to play with stock characters and commodified Irish culture in a way that both mocks and celebrates such tropes; the second, his "water poems," use bodies of water as a form of landscape writing that enables Muldoon both to ground his identity to Northern Ireland and to take flight, embarking on transatlantic crossings from Northern Ireland to America to the Amazon and back again. In these readings of Muldoon, this project seeks to establish a reading of Muldoon that explores and celebrates his roots in the

rural and the natural—a perspective that is often lost in Muldoon scholarship, which traditionally has been much more concerned with global, urban, and cosmopolitan concerns.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, both Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon published new poetry collections—collections released within a week of one another and by the same publisher, Farrer, Straus, and Giroux. Dwight Garner’s *New York Times* double review, “Shared Homeland, Different Worldview,” marks just one of many instances that the two men are considered together:

Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon published their first books in 1966 and 1971, and ever since, their verse has been compared and contrasted, often in facile ways, as if they were Tweedledum and Tweedledee . . . Reading Mr. Heaney’s restrained, earthy poems, you can almost smell the bits of straw and dried sheep dung woven into their woolen fabrics. His work has as much compression, cogency, and unhurried rural gravitas as that of any poet alive. Mr. Muldoon, after toddling briefly in Mr. Heaney’s footsteps, has emerged as a much wilder cat, an allusive and riddling poet, one whose Irish roots are tucked into the shadows casts by his cerebral lighting. (C26)

Garner’s review of *Human Chain* and *Maggot* (Heaney’s and Muldoon’s newest collections, respectively), begins with the above comparison of the two poets, finding them at odds with one another, ultimately asking why they have been written about in conjunction so often, since they are so dissimilar. It is a fair question—is it simply because they are the most well-known of the Belfast Group?¹ Is it that Muldoon was briefly Heaney’s student and that dynamic between the two men intrigues us?² Garner goes on to suggest that it’s “time to give up the Heaney/Muldoon analogizing. These are two men whose poems—in terms of texture and structure, tactic and tone—could not be more dissimilar” (C26). Of course, as Garner then acknowledges, he has been drawn to make the comparison himself, in this very review, despite his own words of advice.

¹ Originally formed in 1963 at Queen’s University Belfast, the Group boasts a star-studded list of participants, including Heaney and Muldoon, of course, as well as Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, and James Simmons.

² Muldoon studied briefly under Heaney during his time at Queen’s.

Most critics, as Garner acknowledges, compare Heaney and Muldoon in order to highlight their differences—much as Garner himself does in his review. And, to be sure, there is plenty of contrasting material to find. However, I suspect that the reason so much writing has been done comparing Heaney and Muldoon is not simply because they are very different poets with very similar backgrounds. In fact, I would suggest that on some level, the opposite is true—that is, that Muldoon and Heaney have more similarities than we might suppose, and that those similarities link them more deeply than the surface contrasts between Heaney’s earthy reflections on Irish soil and Muldoon’s cosmopolitan hi-jinx. Heaney and Muldoon are so often thrown together, first and foremost, because they are, arguably, the most highly regarded Irish poets of their time; and it is in their navigation of Ireland, and its geopolitical background, that some perhaps surprising similarities reveal themselves. These similarities, I suggest, all revolve, in some way, around their uses of the pastoral mode in order to navigate their way through the contested spaces, both literal and figurative, that make up Northern Ireland and Northern Irish poetry. Concurrently, I argue that the pastoral mode offers much to writers who, like Heaney and Muldoon, hail from particularly contested spaces.

Ultimately, I claim in this project that both Muldoon and Heaney traverse the terrain of Northern Ireland and Northern Irish poetics—a landscape marked over and over again with boundaries, with demarcations, with carefully constructed rules and battle lines, with Us and Them, with Self and Other—in very different ways, garnering very different critical analyses of their work, but that both of these poets have utilized the pastoral throughout their lengthy careers to do so. It is a testament to the incredibly flexible, mutable nature of the pastoral as a poetic mode that Heaney and Muldoon have both returned to it across decades of prolific writing. Through an analysis of their various pastoral poems we discover moments of abjection, of

performance, of parody, of both national and global politics—but, I ultimately argue, through each poet’s use of the pastoral mode we can find consistently a reliance on the natural as a backdrop for confronting the various pressures of writing about and of a postcolonial existence.

Reimagining and Renewing the Pastoral as a Space of Resistance

To begin thinking about Heaney’s and Muldoon’s use of the pastoral in their poems as a way to reconsider how the poets are treated, we must first stop and consider how the pastoral has been viewed in recent literature. In very recent years (2010 and forward), there has been a small but, I would certainly argue, energetic and invigorating renewal of critical energy in considering the pastoral as a form worth discussing—and as a form that, far from being relegated to the history books as a mode for writing about sheep, has seen renewed uses as a contemporary and forward-thinking genre that can be flexible, politically powerful, and ecologically engaged. This renewed enthusiasm for the pastoral mode has required its adherents first to defend their interest in the pastoral at all. After all, it was not so long ago that the pastoral was, for all intents and purposes, declared dead.

In 1974, John Bull and John Barrell, editors of the *Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, claimed that “today, more than ever,” pastoral poetry no longer served a need or fulfilled a function. Indeed, they claimed it had “died with Thomas Hardy.” For Bull and Barrell, the pastoral relied on a particular, literal distance between the rural and the urban—a distance that they believed was non-existent in England and probably anywhere else civilized, although perhaps “in the Third World, or in North America,” such a wild and untamed space might exist. Obviously, Bull and Barrell’s assertion that the pastoral might be necessary still in the so-called Third World raises interesting questions for this project, in which I wish to consider Heaney’s and Muldoon’s Northern Irish pastoral in postcolonial terms. However, for now I wish simply to

think about the ways that Bull and Barrell might have missed the mark in regards to the pastoral in general—namely, in overlooking how the pastoral might function beyond a simple and literal rural/urban dichotomy, or how those dichotomies might shift and change, and how the pastoral might be able to shift and change with it.

Because of the dismissal of the pastoral in the latter decades of the twentieth century, as evidenced by Bull and Barrell above, critics who wish to re-engage with pastoral interests find themselves first facing the task of explaining and justifying their work. For instance, in his study of the pastoral as an elegiac form in contemporary British and Irish poetry, Iain Twiddy remarks in his introduction, “Readers hoping to find shepherds and lambs in this study may well be disappointed. Its purpose is not the fruitless task of contending that the pastoral elegy of Milton, Spenser, or even Matthew Arnold is still written today with all its traditional elements intact. That manifestation can no longer be taken—if it ever was—as a plausible representation of a particular world” (1). Rather, he explains, he is interested in looking at how that traditional form has been adapted. He continues:

The animal herders and beneficent landscapes of Sicily and Kos, Mantua and Arcadia, and the leisurely way of life associated with early versions of pastoral and pastoral elegy may have ceded their grip on the poetic imagination; but the psychological processes and social appeals which those figures and locations enabled—emotional simplification, withdrawal from previous attachments, the voicing of aspirations and the establishment of a legacy—are still necessary, whether the means of process lies in the rivers of North Devon (for Ted Hughes), a heron in Central Park (for Michael Longley) or in a half-potato (in Paul Muldoon’s breathtaking 1994 elegy ‘Incantata’). Those original figures of pastoral elegy have no essential value, no unalterably necessary status in themselves; they may equally be farm labourers, cereal farmers or leech-gatherers. Such figures have always been artificial, a convention dependent on the concealment of poverty, disease, early death and illiteracy, but they are no less valuable for that: their worth lies in the ideas they represent and the emotional displacements they can effect. (1)

Twiddy's concern here is, as he makes clear, primarily on the function of the pastoral as an elegiac form, which is not something I wish to consider specifically, although both Muldoon and Heaney have written pastoral elegies, and I go on to discuss some of them in this project at various points. Rather, I am interested in looking at how the pastoral, as Twiddy alludes to above, can be used in contemporary poetry to meet long-standing desires, even if it works in very different ways, and through very different figures, than a traditional shepherd motif that one might expect.

For the purposes of my project, I am drawn to the repeated use of the pastoral mode in Heaney's and Muldoon's work for several reasons. Like Twiddy, I find the pastoral almost endlessly mutable and applicable; indeed, in light of the growing fields of theory such as ecocriticism and green criticism, the pastoral seems not only relevant but absolutely timely. The pastoral also offers us a point of departure for considering similarities that Heaney and Muldoon share that go beyond their Northern Irish pedigree. And, finally, the pastoral, with its rural and anti-urban sentiments and its Western, Anglicized background, provides a complicated and fascinating point of departure for considering Irish poetry through a postcolonial lens. At first glance, the pastoral mode is so thoroughly British it seems hardly relevant to a postcolonial reading. And, similarly, Ireland's proximity to England renders it a sometimes tricky choice for postcolonial study. Given these difficulties, the study of a contemporary Northern Irish pastoral seems ripe for a postcolonial frame of study. Many scholars have already taken up the task of placing Ireland in the postcolonial canon³. However, little to nothing has been written about the way that Irish pastoral poetry exists as part of that postcolonial Irish canon; it is in this project that I aim to illustrate how an Irish pastoralism can serve as a radical anti-colonial poetic mode.

³ Declan Kiberd, Eoin Flannery, and Colin Graham, among many others.

A Northern Irish Poetics: The Call for Identity Politics in Ulster

In this project, beyond the narrow scope of comparing Heaney and Muldoon and arguing for their shared similarity in using nature and landscape in their work, I make a larger case for considering the role of the pastoral in Heaney's and Muldoon's writing as a particularly useful and potentially subversive, resistant mode of writing for Irish poets specifically—and perhaps for postcolonial writers generally. The pastoral, with its particularly Western, Anglicized pedigree, is not necessarily an obvious choice for the resistance of Western hegemony or empire; however, I hope to illustrate here that it is precisely because of its history of Anglicization that the pastoral mode can offer such fertile ground for resistance. (And, similarly, that Northern Ireland, with its close proximity to Britain, can become a space of powerful anti-colonial sentiment.) Grounding my argument this way, however, requires some acknowledgement of how we could and should categorize Ireland in terms of postcoloniality, and how that conversation and ongoing political upheaval has affected the poetry being produced in Northern Ireland.

Because of Northern Ireland's curious position vis-à-vis Great Britain (as colonizer and colonial colluder, conquered and conqueror, white but not-quite, Christian but Catholic), it becomes a place that is both Irish and English, both inside and outside of multiple nations. The difficulty of Ireland, after all, has been that it is both inside and outside Great Britain, that it cannot be nailed down, that it is not this or that. Because of this liminal existence, reading Ireland as postcolonial, and reading Irish writers as postcolonial authors, offers potentially troubling and schema-shaking lenses for extending postcolonial critique. The position of Ireland, and Northern Ireland in particular, both politically and theoretically, is an issue with which I wrestle through each of these chapters, and I do not pretend to have a definitive answer about how we should define postcoloniality—or define Ireland or Northern Ireland. I do, however,

argue consistently that there is much to be said for a postcolonial reading of Ireland and its authors—and that what we stand to gain from such a perspective will outweigh the potential drawbacks and complications of such a perspective. In addition to how a postcolonial reading can further the way that we understand the implications of Irish history on Irish literature, a postcolonial reading can illustrate much about the nature of empire in general, as well. Among other examples, a postcolonial reading of Ireland highlights the construction of Othered identities among populations in close geographic proximity, as well as illustrating the strange ubiquity of imperial practices and over-arching narratives. For example, in a later chapter I argue that the British imaginary constructs Ireland in such a way that renders it “tropical” in the same way that Europe configured the Caribbean as tropical—even though the locales are separated by thousands of miles and vastly different climates.

For the purposes of this introduction, however, I neither wish to outline all the merits of a postcolonial Ireland (I do that elsewhere), nor offer a review of other scholars’ positions on the subject (I do that elsewhere, as well). Rather, I want to reflect briefly on how Ireland’s position as not-quite-British, not-quite-Other has affected its poets. In particular, given the scope of this project, I am interested in how Troubles-era⁴ poets have been forced to deal with their nation’s curious relationship with England.

Since Yeats at least, Irish poets have been faced with a particular kind of pressure to write from a nationalist standpoint—perhaps more so than poets writing from and about other countries. Frederic Jameson might argue that all postcolonial writing is ultimately national allegory, but Irish writers have not simply been branded this way by outside critics but have been

⁴The generic term “The Troubles” refers to the civil war that raged in Northern Ireland from the 1960s through until the Clinton-approved Good Friday Agreement in the 1990s. Notable battles and events during the Troubles includes the Battle of the Bogside, Bloody Sunday, and the IRA Hunger Strikes.

pressured internally, as well, to write first and foremost as Irish poets, telling Irish stories, speaking to Irish political situations. Peter McDonald addresses the pervasive issue of cultural and political identity in Irish writing in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*:

The recognition that identity has become a commonplace, or in some ways a cliché, in cultural and political discussions . . . is seldom made in Irish literary criticism. Here, identity often remains the goal of Irish writing, and the foundation of real literary achievement; a certain amount of bad contemporary writing, especially in the Irish republic, takes the critical agenda of identity entirely seriously, and often comes down to no more than a series of roots proclaimed, allegiances declared, and set gestures rehearsed. [. . .] In Northern Ireland, fewer writers have been willing to make the (potentially lucrative) investment in identity which provides criticism with the correct answers to the pre-set questions. (5-6)

McDonald notes that few Northern Irish writers have been willing to engage directly in these topics, and Paul Muldoon is no exception, as he too has avoided providing any “correct answers” to critical queries about Irish identity. In a 1999 interview, Muldoon commented that he thinks “a writer’s job is to be an outsider, to belong to no groups, no tribes, no clubs. So far as any of us can, it’s to be a free agent, within the state of oneself, or roaming through different states of oneself (*Writing Irish* 89). Muldoon’s careful statement highlights the tension that has been omnipresent in Irish poetry, particularly for poets of the North: the instinctual turn away from black and white ideology and the unavoidable reflection of the geopolitical reality.

However, Muldoon’s expressed belief, that the poet should be an observer and a recorder but never a spokesperson, has not always carried favor with critics. Throughout his career, audiences, critics, and scholars have looked for politics within Muldoon’s poetry; reviewers chided him for not having enough of it, particularly when addressing his earlier works. In a review of *Why Brownlee Left* (1980), Gavin Ewart opens with this dubious praise: “This is Paul Muldoon’s third book of verse, and it’s a very enjoyable one—though the content is more often conducive to the writing of light verse than the bitter realities of Northern Irish politics” (115).

Early criticism, especially, is shot through with this vague dissatisfaction in Muldoon's refusal to take a definitive political stance. Even much more recent criticism—presumably less concerned with Muldoon's political bona fides since the Good Friday Peace Agreement has brought a general, if sometimes uneasy, peace—often expresses frustration with Muldoon's refusal to align himself with any one group or position. In reviewing Muldoon's Pulitzer Prize winning 2002 collection, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, for instance, Peter Davison praises Muldoon's poetics but can't help expressing frustration, as well: "The benefit of such postmodern shenanigans is that they leave nothing out, serious or trivial, but, on the other hand, postmodernism contents itself with allusion rather than conclusion" (G22). Why, reviewers like Davison and Ewart perennially seem to ask, does Muldoon refuse to show all of his cards? The body of criticism regarding Muldoon has been colorful and varied, but one vein of poetic response, in particular, has always asked, rather petulantly, "but what does it all mean?" It is a query to which Muldoon consistently refuses to provide any easy answers; and it is in Muldoon's supposed aloofness that Muldoon's reception has been so at odds with Heaney's.

By and large, critical reception of Seamus Heaney has differed greatly from that of Muldoon. In large part, Heaney has been seen, in contrast to Muldoon's "postmodern shenanigans," as a "salt-of-the-earth" kind of poet, his pastoral work firmly grounded in the soil of his Catholic, Northern Irish roots.⁵ Ironically, however, just as Muldoon has often been criticized for not taking a firm enough political stance, the times that Heaney has been willing to swim into the thick of Northern Irish politics in his poetry, his efforts have not always been well-received. For instance, Heaney's 1975 collection, *North*, which was published at the height of the Troubles and contains some of Heaney's most overtly political and politicized work, evoked

⁵ Whether or not the tenor of Heaney criticism changes at all in the period following his death—which will almost certainly result in an explosion of new Heaney scholarship, I imagine—remains to be seen.

a strong response from critics. Some praised Heaney's foray into the breach of the Troubles, but others found *North*'s frank study of violence and retribution a glorification of the political ideals that fueled Northern Ireland's sectarian violence. Perhaps most notably, Heaney's fellow Irish poet Ciaran Carson declared that the poems of *North* had made Heaney the "laureate of violence" (185). For Heaney, and for Northern Irish poets in general, the political backdrop has operated as a kind of "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" gauntlet that poets must navigate.

Ultimately, of course, there is no neutral ground—no way for a poetics of Northern Ireland to exist outside the turmoil of its contested space. Rather, Northern Irish poets have had to wrestle with the demons of existence in a heavily demarcated state, a landscape that is both literally and figuratively scarred with the borders and boundaries of an ongoing colonial legacy. Both Paul Muldoon and Seamus Heaney have had to navigate that political landscape, albeit in very different ways. In the following chapters, I explore how the pastoral has function in various ways for both Heaney and Muldoon.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1.

They 'smelt of rot': Heaney's Abject Pastoralism

The first chapter, "They 'smelt of rot': Heaney's Abject Pastoralism," begins with a premise that has been omnipresent in criticism regarding Heaney's poetry, particularly his early work: the idea that Heaney is at heart a writer of the pastoral, grounding his work in the fertile landscape of Mossbawn, the small township in Northern Ireland where he was born. One of his earliest and most widely anthologized poems, "Digging," speaks directly to Heaney's preoccupation with the land, the soil, with the idea of making his living on and of that land. The narrator watches his father digging potatoes, imagining it to be a noble pursuit, one that he can

only hope to replicate by digging “with his pen.” “Digging” is the first poem in Heaney’s first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1967), and its reverence for the earth and for the Northern Irish landscape, for a seeming simplicity that exists when a man makes his living from the land on which he lives, sets the stage for not only Heaney’s later work and its emphasis on the natural world, but also for his reception at the hands of readers and critics.

In this chapter I suggest that such a reading of Heaney, while useful and certainly accurate in many cases, does not tell the whole story. Wes Davis has written about what he calls Heaney’s “ambivalent pastoralism,” arguing that we find in Heaney, “the rural poet’s fear that he is laboring for a tangible significance his craft can never achieve,” and that Heaney has “kept up a more or less constant thematic resistance to the pastoral as a genre” (100). I suggest here that Heaney’s pastoralism is not necessarily ambivalent, as Davis suggests, but might instead be read as abject. Multiple examples in Heaney’s oeuvre illustrate that Heaney’s relationship to the pastoral, and the fertile, life-affirming gifts of nature that the pastoral typically celebrates, is frequently tinged with images of death, of rot, of decay, of frightening and monstrous sexuality (rather than “good” and “natural” cycles of life)—all indicative of the lingering ghost of the abject haunting the patriarchal landscape of the typical pastoral tradition. To illustrate this point, I include close readings of multiple early poems. In one example, “Blackberry Picking,” Heaney remembers as a child how the berries he picked could never be preserved properly, how no matter what precautions were taken against decay, “the lovely canfuls always smelt of rot” (7). In another, “The Early Purges,” Heaney recounts the reality of life on a farm through a story about a litter of kittens being drowned in order to control the population of “pests” that plague the farm.

Standing in contrast to early pastoral poems like “Blackberry Picking” and “The Early Purges,” which are preoccupied with excessive, even dangerous fertility, Heaney’s later uses of the pastoral illustrate a profound shift from a pastoral mode in which over-the-top fecundity renders landscapes with the potential for deadly excess to an equally powerful landscape where that same abject excess might be harnessed, however briefly, to positive political ends or even to create the possibility not of fertility turned to rot but fertility turned to rebirth and regeneration. This new, more hopeful abject pastoral spreads its wings in poems like “The Toome Road” and “The Strand and Lough Beg.”

Reading Heaney’s pastoralism as abjection offers several potentially provocative ways of considering Heaney’s work. Reading Heaney’s pastoral scenes as abject spaces lends the pastoral some proverbial “teeth,” a certain edge that is so often lacking from a mode of poetry which is still associated with the shepherds of its inception. Even more so, reading in Heaney’s landscapes an abject pastoralism allows us to think about the Northern Irish landscape, with its past (and present) legacy of colonization, in new and fruitful ways. Abjection, and the dangerous, violent femininity associated with it, allow us to think about colonized land (which is nearly unanimously gendered female against a stronger masculine colonizer) and the gender politics that accompany it in powerful new ways. In fact, it is the very strong gendering of both abjection and landscape that I focus on exclusively in the second chapter of this project.

Chapter 2. **Femme Fatale: Heaney’s Violent Female Pastoral**

Much has been written about the reality that Northern Irish poets have had to wrangle with the tensions of living in a politically contested state, a landscape that is both literally and figuratively scarred with the borders and boundaries of a colonial legacy and the “long war” for

liberation from the United Kingdom.⁶ I argue in this chapter that the poetry of *North*, in particular, published in 1975, marks Heaney's most overt political statement. In particular, the series of "bog poems" that populate *North*, in which Heaney writes about the Bronze and Iron Age bodies found in the bogs of Northern Ireland and Denmark, exist as a direct and overt reaction to the troubling, Troubled political situation of the times.

Many critics have written about Heaney's bog poems—in fact, I would venture to say that more is and has been written about the bog poems than any other single collection in Heaney's voluminous body of work. However, I have found it worthwhile to spend time revisiting them now, not in the least because so often the bog poems are ultimately read as particularly evocative, well-crafted responses to the siren call of national anger or unhealthy kinship with one's brethren. In these readings, where the bog poems are treated as, first and foremost, expressions of republican identity amidst political upheaval, much of their potential power as pastoral spaces gets left behind. In contrast, I would argue, the significance of the bog poems is not that Heaney uses them to think through "the exact nature of tribal revenge," but rather that he also uses them as a platform to create an almost entirely feminine, female-dominated landscape, a "North" of Ireland whose landscape is littered with bogs doubling as birth canals, with hundreds-of-years-old bodies protected in the wombs of the North. As Heaney excavates the fruits of this fecund landscape, his discoveries are both powerful and frightening—and never entirely under his—or anyone's—control, as the bog bodies choose instead to "outstare beatitude," affecting a powerful passive resistance.

My reading of the bogs here extends the argument I make in Chapter One, that Heaney's version of the pastoral is an abject one. Ireland itself, often figured as a women's body or a

⁶ The "long war" was the IRA strategy implemented in the late 1970s. It was devised after it became clear that the IRA were not going to beat back the British through sheer force, and it incorporated both IRA tactics and the political and social work of Sinn Fein.

mysterious feminine entity (either a beautiful and seductive young girl or a wrinkled old crone—both dangerous women in their own rights), can be read abjectly, a frightening feminine that is both part of and pushed out of the United Kingdom. *North* and the bog poems, I argue here, are Heaney's ultimate expression of an abject Ireland.

My reading of the bog poems centers on the idea of the bogs as a highly feminine and frightening landscape, a birth canal figured on the feminized landscape of Ireland. The bog-as-birth-canal produces awful sights of potentially destructive female power, making a Kristevan reading of the poems seem a natural choice. What I suggest makes this reading more fruitful and provocative than simply acknowledging Heaney's debt to abjection in his configuration of the bogs is how we can identify moments in which Heaney celebrates the feminine balanced with moments where he—as male-poet-turned-bog-excavator—works to drive out the feminine, to control it, to contain it in its rightful places. Heaney cannot fully occupy either position, either the male gaze of the poet/archaeologist/colonizer or the feminine space of the bog bodies (or the bog itself). Despite, or perhaps because of, Heaney's conflicted position, the bog poems present a moment of subversive, if fleeting, resistance to male/female, colonizer/colonized binaries, offering as an alternative to the passive female landscape narrative instead a female landscape that is potent, powerful, and potentially deadly.

Chapter 3.

Paul Muldoon: Performing the Pastoral

If Heaney's deep commitment to the landscape of Ireland, to its squelchy bogs and greenery, has become a mainstay of the critical conversation regarding him and his work, then the opposite has been true of Muldoon. What has driven much of the conversation surrounding Muldoon and his work has been an assertion that Muldoon lacks any particular grounding—that unlike Heaney, who seems always to return, finally, to the fertile Northern Irish soil of his roots,

Muldoon is much more comfortable existing in the ether, a transnational poet whose poems are referential, sprawling, comfortable with their own difficulty and density, in-jokes with debatable punch lines. Because of these obvious differences between Heaney and Muldoon, between Heaney's earthy bog poems and Muldoon's global, tongue-in-cheek capers, Muldoon is rarely, almost never, read as a pastoral poet. However, to ignore the consistent thread of the natural and the rural, the continued and insistent importance that the environment has played in Muldoon's work, is to give his corpus short shrift. In this chapter, I make the case for reading in Muldoon a very particular sort of pastoral poem—that is, a performative sort of pastoral.

In short, I argue that Muldoon's pastoral poems offer him the chance to enact performances of stereotypical "Irishness," offering a parodic sendup of both cultural stereotypes and a relentless pressure to offer up commentary on Northern Irish politics. Muldoon achieves this end through a colorful cast of characters that he writes into his pastoral scenes, creating small tableaux of rural Irish life, existing everywhere from traveling circus tents, such as the delightfully absurd world of "Duffy's Circus," where a young child visits a small, spectacle-heavy traveling circus that has "shaken out its tents" in a Northern Irish field, thus bringing the exotic and spectacular into contact with the Northern Irish pastoral, to the inclusion of "stock Irish" characters, such as the returning character of Ned Skinner, a drunken, loutish uncle who embodies all of the worst stereotypes of Irish behavior (drunkenness, sexual aggression, impulsivity). Poems like these are not traditionally pastoral at all, and as such tend to fly under the radar of environmental writing. However, the setting of these poems—a raucous and rural Northern Ireland—is what gives life to the colorful cast of characters, from circus performers to drunken uncles, from IRA men to semi-literature father figures, from virtuous Irish maids to lecherous Catholic priests.

Muldoon uses the pastoral as a platform on which to play out sharply humorous performances of Irish cultural tropes, arming the poet with a double-edged sword, one capable of engaging in political and cultural commentary about what it might mean to be Northern Irish, while at the same time subverting the cultural expectations and pressures to do so. Rural Northern Ireland, for Muldoon, offers a stage where he can tinker with the notion of Irish mythos in a way that straddles the line between reverence and contempt, both valorizing folk notions of Irish identity and bringing to light the artifice of such conventions.

Chapter 4.

A Wind Bred on the Atlantic: Bodies of Water and Displacement in Paul Muldoon

In the final chapter of this project, I look beyond the contested and shifting borders of Northern Ireland, moving outside of the Northern Irish pastoral that has been the focus of the first three chapters to instead trace, through Muldoon's use of water imagery, his movement, both literally and figuratively, out of Ireland. An Irish ex-patriate with dual citizenship in America since the 1980s, Muldoon has, unsurprisingly, approached the pastoral in complicated and sometimes global, transnational modes. In Chapter Four, I look to his use of bodies of water, from rivers to streams to floods and hurricanes, to connect rural and pastoral Irish culture to the rest of the world—a world which Muldoon seems content to traverse at large, as a “global citizen.”

Although bodies of water are not always or necessarily pastoral in nature, I include Muldoon's water poems (of which there are many) in my definition of his conception of the pastoral because his bodies of water—whether they be rivers, floods, or frozen streams—operate in much the same way as the rural pastoral settings I identified in Chapter Three. That is to say, the bodies of water act as springboards for a larger conversation, one that may or may not be about the natural world, or may or may not take place in Northern Ireland; the bodies of water

act as touchstones for Northern Irish identity even when Muldoon is creating a more complicated concept of identity or actively resisting restrictive constructs of Irishness.

In short, I argue here that Muldoon consistently uses water as a metaphor for what I am terming a mobile Irish identity—one that reflects the diasporic, post-colonial, post-modern reality for many Irish people who are living lives outside the Emerald Isle. Because of water’s very fluidity, it offers a perfect conduit for Muldoon to move from the pastoral to the cosmopolitan and back again—in short, to exist as a global citizen, no longer (if ever) tied to a particular Northern Irish locale, without ever severing those ties completely. Rather, bodies of water allow Muldoon to move temporally and spatially (in early poems like “Dancers at the Moy” and “The Waking Father”), and then to move geographically as well, traveling as far and wide as the United States (in poems such as “Meeting the British” and “At the Sign of the Black Horse, 1999”) and South America (“The Lass of Aughrim”).

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, this project seeks to illustrate how Heaney and Muldoon use the pastoral in very different ways to perform what are ultimately similar functions. In very disparate ways, Heaney and Muldoon are both interested in writing about Northern Irish landscape and rural life as a way to make sense of Ireland—both in relation to England and in relation to the rest of the world. In writing about Heaney, I argue that he uses what I have termed abject pastoralism to contend with imperial views of colonized landscapes (as infectious, fecund, and dangerously feminine). His use of abject pastoralism allows him to raise questions about gender, power, and autonomy, and highlight the relationship those issues have to the literal landscape. On the other hand, I argue that Muldoon uses the pastoral as a backdrop from which

to consider, mock, and subvert cultural expectations, with particular interest in how the rural can become a stage upon which the local and the exotic (the Irish and the not-Irish) can meet.

Additionally, both Heaney and Muldoon use the pastoral in order to critique and explore tropes of Irish culture and identity. For Heaney, the land itself, and its long history of association with femininity and maternity, is a point of continual interest, and in this project I trace how throughout Heaney's career he has wrestled with the psychic implications of Ireland-as-a-woman's-body, from the vaginal bogs of *North* to the potentially regenerative green fields of his later eclogues. In the case of Muldoon, cultural tropes about Irish identity—almost always identified through rural, rather than urban, characteristics—offer fertile ground for play, performance, and radical re-imagining, where “stock Irish” characters offer a send-up of “authentic” Irish culture.

Thinking about Heaney's and Muldoon's pastoral poetry in this way can, I believe, offer several important interventions for literary scholarship. Perhaps most simply, a project considering Heaney and Muldoon as pastoral poets contributes to the growing field of ecocriticism, one which has exciting implications for the twenty-first century, as our cultural productions must, it seems, become more closely linked to the environment as green issues become more and more important not simply for cultural cache but for the survival of the human race. In this sense, the pastoral can both offer new insight and itself be radically reinvented, moving beyond its sheep and shepherds and offer a malleable, dynamic form from which to consider environmental and political concerns.

Additionally, this project seeks to link the pastoral and the postcolonial explicitly. Such a connection is a theoretical move that joins together two ideas that may seem at first to be quite separate: namely, the pastoral tradition with its quite Anglicized roots, and the sprawling field of

postcolonial theory, which is concerned with thinking and writing against such Western traditions. However, I hope to show in this project that a wedding between pastoralism and postcolonial theory actually yields significant new ideas and concepts. After all, postcolonial theory has always held an intimate and important connection to land itself—land as a metaphor and an idea, surely, but also to literal landscape. Franz Fanon argues that “imperialism sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds” (181). For Fanon, the impacts of imperialism are both physical and mental, leaving scars on both landscape and psyche. In my readings of Heaney and Muldoon, I argue that both poets are doing just as Fanon prescribes—rooting out the seeds of imperial decay, either literally or figuratively.

CHAPTER 1. **THEY ‘SMELT OF ROT’: HEANEY’S ABJECT PASTORALISM**

As a poet who became famous as a chronicler of the comings and goings of rural Ireland, Heaney’s work is often categorized as pastoral poetry, and Heaney himself valorized and defended the importance of pastoral poetry. In “In the Country of Convention,” he asserts that the pastoral is not a tradition of antiquity, but rather a vibrant and current project, citing the work of Kavanagh and Synge—and by extension, of course, himself (180). In this chapter, I argue, like many others, that Heaney’s work is indeed often pastoral—but that throughout his career, his early representations of the pastoral, or perhaps the anti-pastoral⁷, have been tinged with something darker, more malignant, more frightening, than the typical bucolic odes to country living that are generally associated with pastoral writing. Rather, Heaney presents an abject pastoralism in which the purity of country life is always endangered, always encroached upon. If the anti-pastoral becomes a chance for the rural to critique the urban, for the shepherd to see what others cannot, the abject pastoral presents moments in which the “natural” world is tinged with the unnatural, the frightening, the impure.

These tropes of infection, of things-fearfully-out-of-place, read within the framework of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, yields numerous, multi-pronged results with varying implications for literary scholarship: Situating Heaney’s work as such, it brings the growing field of postcolonial ecocriticism to Irish literature—a move that seems particularly apt, given Ireland’s celebration and commodification as a rural idyll, and Northern Ireland’s lingering status as England’s oldest colony. Additionally, reading abjection in pastoralism raises the question of gender in postcolonial ecocriticism, a perspective that has largely been overlooked thus far, as most postcolonial ecocritical writing has focused on either questions of modernity,

⁷ Which we might define as that version of the pastoral which, rather than idealizing rural life, seeks to present the reality of rural life and its connection to human labor.

development, and industrialization or on literary zoocriticism.⁸ And, finally, working through the lens of abjection provides a critical method for interrogating and destabilizing traditional understandings of womanhood in Irish literature and culture. Much writing exists about the gendering of Ireland in both national and colonial contexts, where Irish identity is embodied through the likes of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the old hag; or the goddess Eire, from whom the island takes its name; or the Virgin Mary, who stands as the epitome of ideal Irish womanhood. Abjection, instead of celebrating traditional gender roles like beatific maternity and eternal suffering, presents a horrible, frightening notion of female excess—a move that both valorizes women as potentially powerful and excludes them as Other.⁹

It is with these goals in mind that I wish to read Heaney's early poems, seeking to frame abjection in nature as a method for considering how gender functions in Heaney's presentation of the geopolitical landscape of Northern Ireland. In particular, I trace the trajectory from his early versions of the abject pastoral as an overwhelmingly fearful and radical presence to his later work, where his focus shifts to finding hope in spite of or alongside that abjection—moving from a fascination with fertility and death to a fixation with the possibility for rebirth and regeneration.

Because Ireland has, and continues, to exist in a space of both geographic proximity and cultural distance from England, Kristeva's notion of abjection offers a particularly useful lens for considering both Ireland's relationship to England and the ways that Irish literature has

⁸ One need only to turn to two recent edited collections of postcolonial ecocriticism, both important and timely texts announcing the official "arrival" of the postcolonial and ecocritical wedding, to see how much these two frames of reference have shaped early endeavors in postcolonial ecocriticism. In *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley, Oxford, 2012), the book is sectioned according to the broad categories of "Cultivating Place," "Forest Fictions," "The Lives of (NonHuman) Animals," and "Militourism." Likewise, in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, Routledge, 2010), the text is divided into two sections, one dealing with development and entitlement on the part of the colonizers, and the second dealing with zoocriticism. This is not to say that gender is ignored in either of these texts; however, neither is it the primary focus.

⁹ The obvious comparison might be toward the Hindu goddess Kali—the female aspect of god, whose name literally means "the black one." However fearsome she might be (and she is fearsome, without question), Kali is also a maternal figure—in fact, some legends have her breastfeeding an infant Shiva on the battlefield.

approached geopolitical realities. If abjection looms large in those spaces where the distinction between Self and Other grows thin, it stands to reason that Ireland, by its very nature as both a colony and a colluder, a victim of British imperialism and a sometime-benefactor of England's imperial reach throughout much of the rest of the world, might be a potentially abject space. For Kristeva, as she reimagines psychoanalysis through a feminist lens, abjection is a concept she defines as that which must be pushed out, that which must be *abjured*. The abject's existence must be denied in order for the Symbolic Order to function—for it to exist at all. She writes that the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In lay terms, for Kristeva the abject thing becomes, literally, That-Which-Must-Not-Be-Named, a non-object representative of all we've repressed. Abjection, then, is the horror caused by the non-object that weakens the boundary between subject and object, that threatens meaning, structure, and everything that has been created and defined by the patriarchal Symbolic Order.

To think very simply about abjection, we might consider it as a phenomenon occurring on two planes: the cultural and the individual. The cultural repression that the abject signifies is what we've had to repress about ourselves in order to enter the Symbolic Order and function—our materiality, the violence of our sex and birth, our inevitable death, and our distinction from animals, a boundary which the abject blurs. On the individual, psychoanalytic level, the abject reminds us that we must separate from our mothers—this is our very first boundary between Self and (M)Other. And, for Kristeva, the abject occupies a powerful place in culture and the psyche. Without it, she says, structure would hold no meaning; in the abject's very threat toward order is order's salvation. In this delineation of Self and Other, of boundaries that exist to maintain order, we encounter immediate and visceral connections to postcolonial theory. If, following

Said, we accept as axiomatic that empire functions through the othering of the colonized, abjection offers a provocative lens through which to consider postcoloniality. Theorists like Homi Babha have written about notions of hybridity and mimicry as potentially subversive modes of existence for colonized peoples, offering moments of reprieve from colonizer/colonized binaries, options for identity formation that can challenge and move beyond Self/Other categorical splits. I suggest that abjection can work in much the same way in a postcolonial ecocritical reading, where abjection in “natural” landscapes can offer moments, however, briefly, where the boundaries between Self and Other, colonizer and colonized, break down and blur, where the established order of things, empire itself, is in peril.

Multiple examples in Heaney’s oeuvre, particularly in his early collections, illustrate that his relationship to the pastoral, and the fertile, life-affirming gifts that the genre typically celebrates, is frequently tinged with images of death, of rot, of decay, of frightening and monstrous sexuality (moments in which queer/ed reproductions take the place of the “good” and “natural” cycles of life). These elements that appear in Heaney’s poems of place ultimately indicate a lingering ghost of the abject haunting the patriarchal and colonial landscape of the pastoral tradition—one that is sometimes overlooked in favor of a reading of Heaney that is less complicated, more earthy and “pure.”¹⁰ For instance, in early reviews of Heaney’s work he is almost unanimously considered a poet, first and foremost, of a very rural Northern Ireland. Indeed, in one of his earliest reviews he is described as a poet of “muddy booted blackberry picking;” and “Blackberry Picking,” a poem from his first collection, 1967’s *Death of a*

¹⁰ The desire to read Heaney as this salt-of-the-earth figure may stem in large part from Heaney’s own representations of his life. For instance, in *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Neil Corcoran describes Heaney’s use of childhood in unequivocal terms: “Everything Heaney has himself written about his childhood reinforces the sense of intimate domestic warmth and affection as its prevailing atmosphere” (235). Corcoran even includes a passage quoting Heaney’s wife, Marie, on the subject: “His family life was utterly together, like an egg contained within the shell, without any quality of otherness, without the sense of loss that this otherness brings” (235).

Naturalist, offers an ideal point to begin considering how abjection shapes Heaney's pastoral presentations.

"Blackberry Picking," a reminiscence of childhood summers spent traipsing out to pick berries, ultimately ends with the narrator mourning the transience of the sweet fruit, the creeping rot that overtakes them before they can be eaten. A deceptively simple poem, "Blackberry Picking" contains within it a looming abjection that predicts the fate of the berries—and the disappointment that fate will cause the narrator. It is late August, the narrator says, when the berries will be ready, that first ripe berry a "glossy purple clot / Among others red, green, hard as a knot" (7). Heaney chooses a telling end-word, as among a "knot" of unripe berries, the one that will presumably taste the sweetest is described as a "clot," a pocket of blood waiting to burst, something nearly fearful in its fecundity. Indeed, the flesh of that first berry was as sweet as "thickened wine," and "summer's blood was in it" (7). The image is at once harmless and nearly frightening in its bloody excess, illuminating the lurking dangers of ripeness and fertility. "Summer's blood" encapsulates the abject here; summer is associated with ripeness, life, bounty—but it is also, "Blackberry Picking" suggests, a bloody business, dangerous in its excess. The very thing that is most appealing about the berries—their ripeness—is also what will render them so soon rotten. Heaney continues to intersperse moments of near-fear into the idyllic recounting of the berry season, writing of the pleasant hunger that

Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's. (7)

Heaney carefully layers the benign and nostalgic images of a rural childhood (gathering berries in “milk cans, pea tins, jam pots,” traipsing “round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills”) with what becomes, suddenly, darker: the berries become a “plate of eyes,” and the children’s berry-stained hands make small but vicious Bluebeards of them all. In Heaney’s hands, the berry-picking children become akin to marauders, performing an almost violent act of harvest.¹¹

The poem’s narrator recounts the inevitable, disappointing end to the berry season, when in their store of blackberries they always “found a fur, / “a rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache” (7). The simple, natural joy of the berries is always short-lived, little more than a dream, as the very thing that makes the berries ripe and possible, the fecundity of nature, is also the thing that ruins them, turning them too quickly over to rot. Heaney’s young narrator is all too aware of the brevity of the season: “I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair / That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot. / Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” (7). The creeping rot is omnipresent, inescapable, no matter what measures are taken to eradicate it. Like the children’s stained hands, the looming presence of an abject over-abundance of nature (too much fertility, an over-ripened rot) is unavoidable.

Interestingly, these excesses of fertility also link Heaney to a host of other postcolonial writers and tropes through what David Arnold coined as tropicality. For Arnold, writing about how nature offered a vista upon which colonial discourse was writ large, tropicality refers to the

¹¹ The invocation of Bluebeard is a particularly fraught image, for Bluebeard’s palms were sticky not with juice but blood. In the French folktale, Bluebeard is a nobleman known for murdering his wives. When his most recent marital acquisition is told to avoid a particular room in his castle, she is overcome with curiosity and immediately crosses the forbidden threshold to discover the hanging, bloody bodies of Bluebeard’s murdered wives. Bluebeard becomes aware of her disobedience by a magical, unwashable bloodstain that appears on his room key—a stain that cannot be washed away to hide the wife’s guilt. The newest wife, to buy some time before Bluebeard beholds her, says her prayers and awaits rescue by her brothers (rendering her similar, if somewhat more pious and quite a bit less independent and interesting, to Scheherazade, who in *One Thousand and One Nights* famously relies not on prayers but her own stories to escape a similarly vicious husband). The reference to Bluebeard is a telling choice—Bluebeard’s narrative relies not simply on a violent husband but on a malign presence (in the form of the wives’ bodies, hung up for posterity). Just as the bloodstain in Bluebeard’s story cannot be washed away, so too the children of “Blackberry Picking” cannot wash clean their own hands.

colonized view of the colonies (in the Southern hemisphere, in Arnold's lens) as overly abundant and pestilent. Arnold argues that the colonizer's view of the colonies was that of a wildly fertile space which, unless harnessed, could quickly veer out of control, representing a fearful overfecundity. He ultimately identifies in the European application of tropicality to a region the invocation of "a host of scientific and scenic ideas that ranged from the paradisaical to the pestilential," above all a way of classifying otherness (35). Although Heaney's Irish bogs are a far cry from the tropical jungles of the Southern hemisphere, they are linked in their frightening excess. And, of course, it is worth considering the long-standing association that the Irish have with fertility and excess in general; the two most omnipresent stereotypes about Irish people continue to be that the Irish are excessive drinkers and have large families. The fecundity of the Irish is, interestingly, attributed to two sources—both the Catholic Church's frowning upon birth control and a more innate, "natural" urge toward excessive procreation.¹²

This excessive reproductive force present in Heaney's nature poems is not something that has gone unnoticed by others; Donna Potts comments of Heaney that his work is ripe with an "overwhelming fecundity of nature" (52). She treads even nearer to an acknowledgement of abjection as she continues, noting that Heaney presents "nature as a terrifying, engulfing force, rather than a gentle teacher or mother" (52). In so many words, Potts identifies the abject in Heaney's work—the horrible, frightening fertility that is not "gentle teacher" but the terrifying maternal force of abjection, that which is capable of both giving and taking life, that which hovers on the edges of nature, on the edges of Self. In taking Potts's almost casual observation one step further and moving into the realm of abjection, we are able to access a point where

¹² For a thorough look at the notions of Irish stereotypes and their entrée into popular culture, Michael de Nie's *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press (1798-1882)* (2004) offers a wealth of information.

feminist and psychoanalytic theory can meet and further perpetuate a postcolonial ecocritical reading.

The difference between what I am terming Heaney's use of the abject pastoral or what Donna Potts has termed as an "overwhelming fecundity" and the notion of tropicality espoused by David Arnold, of course, is that Arnold is writing about tropicality as a way for colonizers to view the colonized; Heaney, on the other hand, uses excessive fertility to write about his own native land. It is an important distinction, and one that illustrates Ireland's situation as a country that refuses to fit neatly into a binary notion of colonizer/colonized.¹³

Kristeva points to many instances where abjection dwells: shit, birth, death, and rotten food are all brought up within the first few pages of *Powers of Horror* as she outlines the concept. For the purposes of this chapter and Heaney's work, however, I am most interested in thinking about the tropes of infection and rot, that which Kristeva terms "death infecting life." Like the tropicality that Arnold sees in colonial representations of the Caribbean, and later India, Kristeva's ideas about infection and excessive fertility mark points where fecundity, supposedly a positive attribute, becomes not only negative but frightening and dangerous, a marker where too much life becomes a harbinger of death. In Heaney's early poems we see this concept recurring time and again, as Heaney's presentations of the area in and around Mossbawn, the farm where he grew up, are tinged with infection and decay.

There is no shortage of rot, infection, horror, in Heaney's work—particularly, his early and much-celebrated odes to the supposed simplicity of farm life are tinged with death and decay. From rotten fruit to rat-infested wells to drowned kittens, Heaney's Northern Irish country life is one where Order is constantly under siege by the creeping influences of excessive

¹³ And, of course, this simple binary cannot accurately depict the situation of any colonial or postcolonial situation; however, it is worth noting that Ireland, through issues of demographics, proximity, and collusion with the Crown, occupies a place in colonial history that has long been muddied.

and deadly fecundity. Heaney's landscapes are always already at risk of infections—a status present in multiple strains of postcolonial literature from across the globe, including Asian, Native American, Caribbean, and African contexts. In the following section, I illustrate the presence of abjection in Heaney's early pastoral poems, seeking in particular to illuminate not only how abjection works to temper the so-called celebration of Irish landscape but also how the lingering presence of abjection in and around that landscape offers a stark reminder of a history of colonial rule. In addition, I work to draw connections between Heaney's representations of Northern Ireland with other postcolonial writers' "natural" landscapes—making the case for abject pastoralism as a trope of the postcolonial pastoral.

Fungus, Rats, and Women: Heaney's Problematic Pastoral

In *The Poetry of Resistance*,¹⁴ Sydney Burris writes that "the pastoral's ability to keep one eye trained on the realistic, particularized landscape and one on the idealized vista of a better world represented the genre's most compelling feature" (7). Burris presents a relevant claim not only because it's an accurate observation of the role that the pastoral has played in the past but also because it speaks to the ways that the pastoral, and nature writing in general, has come to play an important role in postcolonial literature. A pastoral literature allows the author the chance to tell the story of a particular place and a particular geopolitical landscape, and at the same time to use that "place writing" as a chance to write into existence the idea of the nation again. The author can make, through that "idealized vista of a better world," use of the pastoral's capacity for invention of place.

Historically, the pastoral has been not only about imagining a better rural world—or a return to a golden age—but also about using the rural to contrast and critique the urban. In this

¹⁴ Burris's commentary is part of his larger argument about the political and even radical presence of the pastoral in Heaney's work.

sense, too, there is perhaps an obvious alignment between the pastoral and the goals of postcolonial writing: can we not see how the pastoral might also be about the space/place of the colony to contrast and critique the metropole? Edouard Glissant has argued that because of the trauma of history inflicted upon landscape itself, the writing of postcolonial nations cannot and should not be interpreted as a pastoral writing but rather as a historical record of a “fight without witnesses” (177). However much I agree with Glissant about the trauma of conquests writ large across landscapes, the pastoral offers far more to postcolonial writers—and postcolonial ecocriticism—than he suggests. In allowing writers simultaneously to tell the “truth” of a locality and at the same time look back to an idealized pre-colonial “golden age” (and thus imagine a future), the pastoral allows just such acts of imagination and reclamation that postcolonial theorists such as Said, who writes in *Culture and Imperialism* that “[the] land is recoverable at first only through imagination,” have advocated as integral to the postcolonial project (177).¹⁵ Additionally, the pastoral’s long history of using the rural as a seat from which to critique, and indeed fully see, the urban offers fruitful opportunities for critiquing the metropole from the former colony. Finally, there is something piquantly pleasing about using the pastoral, a form that has, since at least the seventeenth century, been so thoroughly Anglicized, to write against empire.

This idea of using the pastoral as a platform from which to write into existence an idealized, imagined nation does, of course, open itself to the charge of romanticization—either of the romanticized idea of a return to a “pure” pre-colonial past, or the fetishizing of the land itself. This danger may be particularly present for Ireland, in fact, as Eoin Flannery has noted: “As a

¹⁵ For the sake of clarity, let me state unequivocally that I am not advocating that the usefulness of the pastoral for postcolonial writers is dependent upon an idealized return to a pre-colonial (and thus unreachable, unknowable) past. Rather, it is in the imaginative use of such a golden age within the conventions of the pastoral in order to also “write into being” a new present.

consequence of its peripheral location within Europe and its status as a Celtic outreach of British colonialism, Ireland has historically been entrapped within vocabularies of myth and romance” (87). Seamus Deane has written, similarly, that “the Irish landscape, whether in the form of the savage sublime, the picturesque, or the straightforwardly scenic,” has been presented in such a way as to remove “the traces of a disastrous history” and instead make Ireland fit for public tourist consumption (148).¹⁶ By marrying the pastoral to the abject, however, the pastoral is able to sidestep such mythic and romantic connotations and instead present an opportunity for not only critique but also subversion—rendering unstable the “easy” binaries of gender and empire.

In “Blackberry Picking,” Heaney uses a pastoral splendor that is tempered by the fearful reality of nature to illustrate that the truth that the line between life and death, between ripe and rotten is so perilously close. A similar offering, also from *Death of a Naturalist*, finds another of Heaney’s child narrators grappling with the narrow gap between life and death. In “The Early Purges,” however, death is not the inevitable and natural end to a cycle but something far more frightening for its purposefulness. “The Early Purges” begins with the narrator proclaiming, “I was six when I first saw kittens drown. / Dan Taggart pitched them, ‘the scraggy wee shits’ / into a bucket” (13). The young narrator watches as Taggart drowns the kittens, matter-of-factly remarking that it’s “better” for them this way.¹⁷ Taggart is nearly a textbook example of how the

¹⁶ The success of Ireland’s commodification as an island of magic and romance, folklore and whimsy, can be experienced on nearly a global level. The wild success of cultural commodities such as Michael Flatley’s Riverdance series in the 1990s or the proliferation of St. Patrick’s Day, Guinness, and other Irish exports speaks to the romantic branding of Ireland as not merely a nation but an idea, a primitive throwback able to capitalize on its own past to catapult itself into “Celtic Tiger” status in the present. (The success of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger days is, of course, debatable from economic, environmental, and social standpoints. See Eva Paus, “The Rise and Fall of the Celtic Tiger: When Deal-Making Trumps Developmentalism” (2012); K. Roundtree, “Tara, the M3, and the Celtic Tiger: Contesting Cultural Heritage, Identity, and a Sacred Landscape in Ireland” (2012); and Michael Breslin, “Unemployment and Psychological Well-Being in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland” (2013) for sustained discussions of such.)

¹⁷ Taggart resembles a similar character, Ned Skinner, who appears in several of Paul Muldoon’s collections, including one memorable occasion in which he slaughters pigs. (The poem is titled simply “Ned Skinner.”) In fact, Skinner’s role in Muldoon’s work as a “stock Irishman” is discussed at length in the third chapter of this project.

antipastoral has played out in Irish literature, standing in a line from Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* to Patrick Kavanaugh's *The Great Hunger* and performing what Declan Kiberd has called "the more radical sort [of pastoral], in which a real peasantry may be depicted as having qualities peculiar to aristocrats" (156). And, indeed, Taggart is depicted in the poem as being misunderstood by outsiders and "town people." When the job is done, Taggart plucks the kittens from the bucket and tosses them aside, "glossy and dead" (13). The dead kittens are frightening enough, the narrator confides, but they are not the only animals that die under Dan Taggart's business-like hands:

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung
Round the yard, watching the three soggy remains
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows,
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks. (13)

Although he is frightened, the narrator confesses that he is surrounded by the "little deaths" of a functioning farm—rabbits and crows hunted, chicken butchered, rats trapped. It is, however, somewhat difficult to square the dead crows, rabbits, chickens, with the drowned kittens; presumably, rats wreak havoc in a barn, rabbits and chickens serve as meals, and crows, if not eaten, at least must be exterminated before they do damage to crops. Kittens, however, are little more than domestic pets. Perhaps, if we are being generous, we might argue that they keep down rodent populations on a farm. It is more likely, however, that they are simply more mouths to feed, more animals underfoot. Their death is frightening, part and parcel of a masculine rural world where fertile excesses must be carefully regulated, and when the narrator encounters other acts of violence he is reminded of their "dead and glossy" bodies.

Ultimately, though, their drowning is a practice which Heaney's narrator accepts:

Still, living displaces false sentiments
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups.' It makes sense:
'Prevention of cruelty' talks cuts ice in town
Where they consider death unnatural
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down. (13)

The narrator comes to accept, even defend, such a practice, and the pastoral becomes the political quite quickly in the last few lines of the poem, as the practicalities of the rural are contrasted to the naïve, ultimately dim-witted beliefs of those who dwell in "town," where they have the privilege of being able to take the high road, arguing about cruelty and rights when, the narrator implies, rural life provides no such opportunity for gentleness or posturing. The urban, the outsiders (the town itself) do not and will not understand these rural cruelties, Heaney's narrator suggests. Like the creeping rot of blackberry season, so too on the farm can overabundance become a harbinger of death and decay. The subtext of the poem is loud and clear: "Life here (on this farm, in Northern Ireland, in this place) is tinged with cruelty, with violence. If you are not from here, you will not understand."¹⁸ And, two, the function of masculinity looms large in the poem. It is, in "Early Purges," the job of men like Dan Taggart to control fertility. It is unpleasant, certainly, and it is frightening to children, but it must be done. Here, Heaney's abject pastoral vision is brought to Order through the presence of patriarchal power. That is not, however, always the case, as I will discuss at length in Chapter Two.

In both "Blackberry Picking" and "The Early Purges," Heaney writes through the voice of his child narrators about intimate knowledge of what I am terming abjection; in both poems, the narrators know and accept the bitter reality of fearful fecundity, of a dangerous fertility that

¹⁸ Heaney's use of the term "pests" suggests a channeling of colonialism, as well; during Cromwell's siege of Drogheda, he made the infamous, apocryphal call for the extermination of everyone, including women and children, because "nits breed lice."

looms over the supposed idyll of Northern Ireland, whether it appears in the “stinking juice” of rotten blackberries or the “glossy and dead” bodies of unwanted kittens drowned at birth. Heaney is not alone in his use of precocious young voices; child narrators have been a prevalent and established trope in postcolonial literature at large. In *The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Literature*, Meenakshi Bharat describes the phenomenon as thus: “In his traditional innocence, the non-judgmental child seems best equipped to mirror the complexity of the postcolonial in its totality without any censorship” (4). She continues, “In the context of a violent fractious world of political ferment and struggle, the child comes to stand for what Walvin calls ‘a force which cannot be ignored.’ It is this enlightened recognition of the child’s consciousness, which makes postcolonial novelists . . . recognize the child as an important participant in, and commentator on the political scene” (7). In using his young narrators, Heaney is entering into a dialogue with many other postcolonial writers.¹⁹ In terms of my argument here—that Heaney’s use of the pastoral is tinged with abjection—the presence of children in an abject landscape is particularly interesting, given that we might consider children to belong in an abject space, as well, being as they are not quite autonomous beings, not quite fully separated from (M)other. Indeed, the child is always associated with female bodies in such a way that we might read the child itself as female. Through the use of child speakers, Heaney is able to transcend his own position as male poet, keeper of the pen and The Word, and inhabit a space that is considerably more feminized.

Although Heaney uses child narrators explicitly in the above poems, in others he purposely distances himself from the voice of the child, seeking instead to promote an adult self, one more removed from the fantastic or fearful musings of a child. In “Personal Helicon,” also

¹⁹ Paul Muldoon has also used child speakers throughout his poetry—an issue that I address in later chapters of this dissertation, as well as in my Master’s thesis, “Naïve Narrators: Paul Muldoon’s Child Speakers” (Indiana State University, 2008).

published in 1966's *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney writes again of the fearful, "scareful" realities of rural life, but in "Personal Helicon" Heaney begins to distance his adult self, or at least an adult narrator's voice, from the abjection of the natural world, seemingly needing to provide some distance between himself as poet, creator of structure and order both linguistic and imaginary, from the abject and frightening pastoral he repeatedly invokes.

"Personal Helicon" begins with Heaney exploring what will come to be characteristic of so much of his early work: the depths of Northern Irish soil. In this case, he is expounding on his love of wells. His narrator writes as an adult reminiscent of childhood, beginning with what is almost an endorsement of the fearful nature of a well—its gaping maw of darkness, its unknowability—and the subsequent attraction such a mysterious (and frankly vaginal) site holds:

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss. (14)

The very elements of the well that most frighten (the looming darkness, the creeping rot) are also the elements that most draw the narrator to them, and he recalls the various encounters he's had with such places, one "so deep you saw no reflection in it" and another one, much more shallow, where "when you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch / a white face hovered over the bottom" (14). It is unclear which well might be more frightening—one with no discernible bottom, or one with an inhabitant in its depths. At any rate, Heaney's fascination with the well seems a particularly Irish one, as "healing wells" have a long history in Ireland—a superstition that the British tried unsuccessfully to suppress. Heaney's approach to the wells is typical of his abject pastoral vision; the Irish landscape is presented as both sacred and local, something to be celebrated, and at the same time fearful and potentially dangerous and uncontrollable—as it must have seemed to the British colonizers.

The “white face” is not the only time another body or voice or being is projected from within the depths of the well, and each description grows more abject, more tinged with horror:

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection. (14)

Here, the wells that Heaney encounters embody Kristeva’s notion of the abject as that which breaks down the boundaries, first and foremost, between Self and Other. The well’s echoes of the narrator’s “own voice,” but with “clean new music” begs the question—is the voice an echo, or someone else entirely? At what point does autonomy end, when the voice reflected back is not recognizably your own? What power does the well hold within it? Even more visceral, perhaps, is the image of the rat “slapping” across the narrator’s reflection, an infestation of vermin across the reflected Self, a violent interruption that Heaney terms as “scaresome.”

And yet, Heaney tells us, these wells are a source of endless fascination—a fascination which must be hidden, or redirected into an appropriate venue, in adulthood. The last stanza concludes with a note of self-deprecation:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring

Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (14)

Here, Heaney lets poetry stand in as the appropriate adult substitute for the well, a pursuit where narcissism and navel gazing is still allowed, even encouraged—where the act of writing can provide the same pleasantly frightening thrills as the wells of childhood. It is a very particular sort of pastoral poetry that Heaney advocates here, a poetry that allows him to “pry into roots” and “finger slime.” The verbiage becomes pointedly masculine and sexual, as the acts of well-gazing (and, necessarily to the metaphor, poetry-writing) are depicted as instances where one

must “pry” and “finger” their way into the darkness. It is not, I suggest, a stretch to read the well as a feminine space, part of the Irish landscape which, too, is always already figured as a woman. In fact, there is a history of associating wells with female saints in Ireland, an association that I do not believe is accidental. In a nation named specifically after a female goddess (Eire), wells (and bogs, as I will argue in the next chapter) come to represent particularly feminine and sexual spaces. Not incidentally, these spaces also become sites of tension, power, anxiety, and mystery—or abjection.

There is an aura of resistance, certainly, in the wildness of Heaney’s abject landscapes, particularly in the way that they stand apart from the properly British perspective of landscapes that are, quite literally, landscaped. Referencing Eamon Slater’s study of the environmental destruction of Ireland via British colonization, James McElroy writes that the British picturesque in Ireland

registers a measure of detachment which benefits a landlord, outsider, or tourist class whereby the English and their surrogates are able to sanction a worldview devoid of wilderness, work and hardship so that colonial order (in miniature, the demesne) might serve as iconic representation; among other things, might minimize indigenous presence along with any native categories pertaining to Ireland’s ecological/natural space. And yes, one of the most crucial of these eco-colonial spaces was the garden as situated inside Anglo-Ireland’s landed estates. Indeed, it was through the medium of such elegant and expansive gardens, says Slater, that the Anglo-Irish were able to differentiate themselves from those scores of impoverished tenants whose very presence invoked powerful contrast: if nature within the perimeter walls of the great estates constituted what was civilized and ‘picturesque,’ then that which lurked outside of the graduated borders of such reserves was deemed to be uncivilized wilderness. (55-56)

Heaney’s pastoral poems take place in that “uncivilized wilderness,” the wild and untamed spaces where the colonial boot of England dare not tread, beyond the Big House and into the bog. In situating the environment in such a way, through what is controlled and what is not

controlled, abjection becomes a useful lens for reading Heaney's pastoral spaces; they are, in frank terms, the wild feminine places where colonial order has been unable to take root.

These abject pastoral spaces offer both a sendup of colonial tropes and an affirmation of them. If the colonial view of an island is that of fearful tropicality, Heaney's continued obsession with the most feminine attributes of Ireland's landscape, its excess fecundity and creeping rot, its deep wells and grasping bogs, holes capable of drowning a man in their depths, offer both a space of potential resistance and a gendered ordering of the landscape that does more to uphold colonial views than combat them. Heaney walks the razor's edge of abjection, doubly bound between a subversive embrace of the fearful feminine and a patriarchal excavation of it. Such a reading of the depths of the Irish soil figures prominently, as well, into another of Heaney's early poems that I wish to discuss: "The Tollund Man."

"The Tollund Man," published in 1972's *Wintering Out*, marks one of Heaney's first engagements with the "bog bodies," of Ireland and Denmark.²⁰ In *North*, published three years later in 1975, Heaney will write a sequence of poems centered on the uncannily well preserved Bronze Age bodies that have been discovered in these bogs.²¹ It is in "The Tollund Man," however, that Heaney begins writing about the bogs and the strange, strangely familiar content which they yield. Although the second chapter focuses on *North*'s bog poems, I include "The Tollund Man" in this chapter because it marks, I argue, a significant link between Heaney's early representations of what I have termed abject pastoralism and his work in *North*, where he, as

²⁰ The other early mention of the bogs appears in the poem "Bogland," published in *Door into the Dark* (1969). I do not give it full treatment here because it, unlike the later poems from "The Tollund Man" on, is primarily concerned with the bog itself, rather than the bodies that are pulled from it. In fact, "Bogland" mentions no human remains at all, focusing instead on the "great Irish elk" which was preserved in the bog's "bottomless" depths.

²¹ Heaney took as his source material for these poems P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, which features photographs of the bodies.

many critics have argued, marks a turning point in his career—and invokes abjection in an extremely direct manner.

Abject imagery in “The Tollund Man” abounds, but in a very different way than it has appeared in the poems I have termed “abject pastorals” thus far. In the earlier poems, Heaney plays with images of death and rot appearing, *creeping*, into an otherwise ideal, idyll landscape. In “The Tollund Man,” the images of rot and decay become, for the first time, directly linked with gender: it is in “The Tollund Man” that the abject forces of nature, nature’s abject presence, is distinctly marked as a feminine power. Nature/the bog/the landscape/Ireland is all encapsulated in “The Tollund Man” as “the goddess,” a being with whom Heaney both identifies and fears.

Heaney begins by narrating the journey he plans to make to see the Tollund Man, emphasizing the preserved nature of the body with its “peat-brown head,” the “mild pods of his eyelids,” and his “pointed skin cap” (62). Exposure is the order of the day, as Heaney relays that the Tollund Man’s “last gruel of winter seeds” was still “caked in his stomach,” and he was “naked except for / the cap, noose, and gurdle” (62). How the Tollund Man came to be preserved this way, held in the bog that has been both grave and womb for centuries, is the result of a woman, the narrator tells us:

Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint’s kept body,

Trove of the turf-cutters’
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus. (62)

The “goddess” is both a mythical being and the bog itself, an idea and a landscape, a giver of life in that her “dark juices” preserve the Tollund Man and gift him with a “saint’s kept body,” and a harbinger of death in that she trapped him, “tightened her torc on him.” The goddess here is figured directly along Kristeva’s lines of the abject—a maternal and sexual figure, capable of both giving and taking life—a figure both sexual and violent in equal measure.

Despite the overt and powerful femininity of the bog, much of the scholarly conversation surrounding the bog poems, and particularly “The Tollund Man,” has had more to do with the notions of religious sacrifice and tribal affiliation, with national psyche and historical mining, than with either an ecocritical or gendered reading. Eugene O’Brien notes that “digging becomes a metaphor of the probing of the unconscious, unspoken aspects of his nationalist psyche throughout the early works” (28). Speaking of “The Tollund Man particularly, O’Brien writes, “It is the realization of both the attraction and ultimate futility of the tribal religion of place that is enacted by this poem” (28). These readings, largely psychoanalytic, leave out the reality of the bog as a physical piece of Irish landscape, one which has been both literally disfigured through colonization and metaphorically gendered as female. For O’Brien, and other critics, the focal point of the conversation has been about place and community identity, leaving gender largely ignored—or simply commented upon in passing. And, in fact, even when Seamus Deane explicitly mentions the role that gender plays in “The Tollund Man,” it is not in terms of how a dangerous femininity might offer powerful modes of resistance, but rather to comment that the bog poems offer Heaney a chance to reflect on one part of his nationalist psyche, that of the “slightly aggravated young Catholic male” (66). Scholarship has largely overlooked Heaney’s distinct awareness of this fearsome, powerful combination of sex and violence, life and death, as he continues in the second half of the poem:

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to germinate
The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards (62-63)

The Tollund Man, as “bridegroom to the goddess,” might take on some of her powers to give and take life, Heaney suggests; the Tollund Man might “make germinate” the dead, upset the boundary between the living and the deceased.

In most critical readings, Heaney’s preoccupation with digging, with wells, with what can be found under the surface of the earth, is read in terms of either the connections Heaney draws between the historical and archaeological detritus beneath the soil and the current political tensions above it, or, less commonly, as a kind of phallic penetration of the earth itself.²² Terry Gifford’s chapter on Heaney’s nature poems that appears in *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* performs just such a reading, as Gifford comments of “The Tollund Man”: “Through the course of the poem Heaney comes to identify with this bridegroom [the Tollund Man]. An imaginative exploration of forces at work in the history and bogs of Jutland ... has found a connection with the Six Counties and a familiar discomfort for the writer by the end of the poem” (95). Gifford’s reading of “The Tollund Man” is generally typical of the critical reception of Heaney’s so-called nature poems; that is, much is made of the metaphors between the nature landscape and the political tensions of the times. And, of course, it is a valid and necessary reading—to ignore the connections between the unearthed past and the above-earth present would be to miss the mark of the poem all-together. However, such a reading leaves gender unconsidered or at least overlooked.

²² See Sabina Muller, *Through the Mythographer’s Eye: Myth and Legend in the Works of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland* (2005).

To be fair to Gifford, he does raise the question of gender, at least spectrally, noting, “What, in the tribal context that Heaney finds himself, are the implications of his connectedness with nature in its violent as well as fertile forces?” (95-96). For Gifford, Heaney’s connectedness with violent and fertile nature is what allows him to personify the voice of “the goddess” in later poems (particularly the bog poems of *North*). However, Heaney’s acknowledgment, even fascination, with both the violence and fecundity of “nature” is at bottom a fascination with that fearful feminine, the abject being—and a natural progression in his “nature poems” from the abject pastoral of early poems like “Blackberry Picking” and “Early Purges,” to the more gendered abjection of poems like “Personal Helicon” and “The Tollund Man,” where the fearful femininity of nature is not merely hinted at through the presence of rot and infestation but directly invoked through images of womb-like wells and bogs that operate as both creative and destructive forces.

Much has been made of the last stanza of “The Tollund Man,” when Heaney writes:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home. (63)

Tribal tensions, historic animosity and political discord, are analogous to the political tensions of the day, and Heaney’s concluding stanza offers a bittersweet acknowledgement of that metaphor. Heaney’s violently familiar bogs speak to his place in a line of Irish poets whose ecological representations of Ireland have been tinged with violent and deathly imagery. For example, Heaney’s violent landscapes owe much to Patrick Kavanaugh’s “The Great Hunger” (1942). McElroy has raised cogent points about how violence and death in the “The Great Hunger” should be read as not simply “dark, dismal, and unlush,” but that “it would be much more productive to recognize what Kavanaugh makes possible in such confined topographic spaces;

recognize that such entries bear witness to the woundedness of a land which contains, inside its unresuscitated ancestral discourse, the ecological legacies of what came before, during, and after ‘the Penal days’” (59). Heaney’s bogs, it seems, offer similarly “confined topographical spaces,” which do similar work—and, too, which might benefit from the sort of careful, ecologically cognizant reading that McElroy espouses for Kavanagh.

However, such an awareness of “ecological legacies” might be taken one step further in reading Heaney’s landscape. Particularly, I wonder if, perhaps, not enough has been made of the fact that parishes are not described as murderous, or violent, or dangerous, but “man-killing.” Directly gendered, the parishes themselves, and their bogs and earth goddesses, are invoked as man-killers—landscapes that are abject by their very nature. And Heaney, recognizing the uncanny quality of the abject, is both “lost” and “at home” in such a space, both heimlich and unheimlich—both bridegroom and victim to the goddess. It is this very “in-between-ness,” neither lost nor found, fertile nor deadly, that marks the power of abject spaces—and offers one way of reasoning why abjection in landscapes and nature writing might be so prevalent in postcolonial literature, as I have been at pains to suggest here.

The second chapter of this project focuses exclusively on the bog poems of *North*. With that in mind, I would like to conclude this chapter with an admittedly cursory exploration of the post-*North* pastoral that appears in Heaney’s work. There has been, most certainly, a shift in Heaney’s later writing away from the very focused and land-oriented lyrics of his earlier work into more abstract territory. That is not, however, to say that Heaney ever truly abandons the Irish landscape that served his early career so well and remains a potent marker of his craft. In particular, I wish to look at two poems that appear in 1979’s *Field Work*, “The Toome Road” and

“The Strand at Lough Beg,” contrasting them to Heaney’s much more recent collection, 2002’s *Electric Light*.

In both the “The Toome Road” and “The Strand at Lough Beg,” Heaney engages in the *dinnseanchas*, or the lore of Irish placenames—a Celtic tradition that has found its way into contemporary Irish poetry, as well. Donna Potts suggests that this use of the *dinnseanchas* works to “evoke a precolonial past,” and at the very least establishes a palpable sense of place made all the more interesting because both the Toome Road and the Strand, in Heaney’s telling here, are marred or intruded upon by an imperial English presence (10). Convoys, roadblocks, soldiers, guns, and spent shells litter these places, these poems, making impossible an idyllic pastoral presentation.

“The Toome Road” is written in direct first person, as the narrator begins, “One morning early I met armoured cars / in convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres, / all camouflaged with broken alder branches” (143). Immediately the machinery of empire is confused and subverted, as armoured cars “warble” like songbirds, a frightening and industrial rendering of a quaint pastoral staple. Even more significant, the cars are depicted as being camouflaged with alder branches, the alder being a “most traditional” Irish tree, according to Tree Council of Ireland, which also notes that “in ancient Ireland sections of alder trunks were used as round shields.” The English military vehicles are being obscured by what have, traditionally, been Irish shields. The alder branches, Heaney tells us, are broken—and yet, they are there, a particularly Irish wood, a wood traditionally used to protect the Irish from their enemies. Even in their imperial power, the British control of Ireland is subtly subverted and upended, as the cars “warble” along, shielded by alders that do not prevent the Irish narrator from recognizing the vehicles.

The narrator questions, “How long were they approaching down my roads / as if they owned them?” The British presence is an intrusion into the natural order of things, the landscape itself, the narrator suggests:

I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. (143)

In a pointed doubling, the English are an invading presence on the Toome Road, but things naturally and ecologically Irish (warbling, alder branches) creep also into the Queen’s convoy. Infection, it appears, runs both ways—positioning Ireland as the abject thing the British cannot fully eradicate, even in a display of military prowess.

The narrator wonders idly if he should sound an alarm among his neighbors, wonders if such an early warning would accomplish anything other than establishing him as the “bringer of bad news” (143). At that point the poem shifts, and the narrator addresses the British military patrol directly. He begins with a tongue-in-cheek address: “O charioteers, above your dormant guns, / It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass, / the invisible, untoppled omphalos” (143). The British, rendered here as charioteers, are unaware, Heaney suggests, of the “omphalos,” the navel, the center of the world—or in this case of Ireland, at least—that they are passing. It is, Heaney says, “invisible,” but “untoppled,” and we are left to wonder if the alder branches are camouflaging the convoy or performing their oldest function, shielding the Irish from those who might do them harm.

Even more so, we are left to wonder what, precisely, Heaney wishes to invoke with the word omphalos itself. Omphalos is a Greek term; omphalos stones were said to mark the way toward the center of the world, the navel of the world. The most famous of these stones was the oracle at Delphi. Heaney’s traffic with the classics is well-established, but omphalos has much

nearer literary roots, as well, as Buck Mulligan in James Joyce's *Ulysses* refers to his home as an omphalos. Buck later suggests that he wishes to set up a "national fertilizing farm" there, where he will "offer his dutiful yeoman services for the fecundation of any female of what grade of life soever who should there direct to him with the desire of fulfilling the functions of her natural" (329). Omphalos exists as a distinctly gendered term—both in its denotation as the navel of the world, that place from which the umbilical cord connects each of us to our mother/other, and in the way that Buck Mulligan uses it, in typically facetious fashion, as a place where he will so kindly offer his stud services to promote female fecundity. The inclusion of the word in "The Toome Road" is the only direct invocation of gender Heaney includes, and the directness of that invocation might be debatable. However, the invisible omphalos that Heaney imagines the British passing unawares is a powerful rendering of the abject. Against the unknowing British Self, the Irish other is figured through the invisible presence of the omphalos, a maternal and fecund force that looms large, abjected but not ever eradicated.

I have suggested above that the theme of infection—either of the Irish history and folklore into the British convoy, or of the convoy itself into the Irish countryside—is both prevalent and concurrent, affecting both colonizer and colonized. We might render this a Kristevan reading if we were to think of how her notion of abjection might apply—as Irish place names, Irish folklore in the form of alder branches, Irish fauna in the form of a warbling convoy, all insidiously, invisibly, infect the British Self. And, too, Heaney casts the Irish themselves in the role of the abject being, labeling them "sowers of seed, erectors of headstones" (143). They are both the givers of life on the landscape, literally planting seeds, but also planting headstones, seemingly balanced between life and death. Again, following Kavanagh in his ecological presentation of Ireland, Heaney creates an Irish "nature poem" where nature is neither truly life-

affirming or entirely maleficent. Rather, Heaney presents a troubled but not unhopeful pastoral, one which reflects what Michael Vincy, in writing about the Irish experience of nature, has described as Ireland's decision after the "biological treachery" of the Famine, to "neither grant nor expect any further quarter" (62). Vincy alludes to an Irish relationship with ecology and landscape that is complicated by the colonial disasters of the past, where the natural world remains scarred by the colonial past. And it is within this framework that Heaney's abject pastoral meets directly with the mechanized, industrial machinery of empire—a meeting that he also explores in "The Strand at Lough Beg."

"The Strand at Lough Beg" is dedicated to Collum McCartney, Heaney's cousin who was killed by Protestant gunman during the Troubles. Indeed, the poem is written in the second person and addressed directly to the deceased. Heaney asks of his cousin:

What blazed ahead of you? A faked roadblock?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down
Where you weren't known and far from what you knew:
The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,
Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew. (145)

The unnatural terror of the Protestant roadblock (with its red lamp, sudden brakes, cold-nosed gun) sits in contrast to what Collum "knew": landscape, clay and water, spires, treelines. Again, as in "The Toome Road," Heaney presents a pastoral setting that is encroached upon by a colonial presence.

Heaney reminisces, imagines his cousin in childhood, growing up in fear of unknown violence, mistaking the sounds of hunters for something more fearful, of being "scared to find spent cartridges, / acrid, brassy, genital, ejected" (145). The image of weaponry as phallic, spent shells as genital, being ejected, so nearly ejaculated, reinforces the motif of Ireland as a female

and feminine landscape, ever at the mercy of the violent masculinity of the conqueror. There is, perhaps, not anything particularly new in this rendering of the masculine conqueror/feminine conquered version of a colonial landscape; however, read within the framework of Heaney's presentation of abject pastoralism, "The Strand at Lough Beg" marks a kind of turning point in its final stanza—one that is played out repeatedly in the work that will follow it.

In the final stanza, Heaney positions himself back on the strand: "Like a dull blade with its edge / Honed bright, Lough Beg half-shines under the haze" (146). But now, in the midst of the rural landscape (where, Heaney tells us, cows graze "up to their bellies" in mist), Collum is suddenly, viscerally present:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you are on your knees
With blood and roadside mulch in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (145)

In this final stanza, the natural world becomes a place of restorative, healing power, as the moss and mist of the strand, which in other poems we might construe as some of that frightening fecundity and creeping nature that threatens to overtake its inhabitants, become the tools with which Heaney is able to clean off and wash Collum's body. A feminine and potentially dangerous place that becomes a space for potential restoration and regeneration, Heaney's manipulation of life and death offers an Irish pastoral that is all too aware of colonization's legacy, but aware, too, of its own ability to combat and challenge that legacy. After all, it is nature itself which Heaney uses to care for Collum's body.

The landscape that Heaney presents in “The Strand at Lough Beg” marks an important shift in his presentation of the pastoral. Although there are still moments of abject imagery (particularly in the violently sexual imagery of the spent cartridges, for instance, which are death packaged in sexual terms), Lough Beg here presents a landscape that, even in its sometime abjection, offers a source of healing and catharsis. The pastoral here functions as both an elegy²³ and as a curative tool, allowing Heaney simultaneously to grieve and to present a hope for the future, as he “plants” rushes over his cousin’s body. (That the rushes “shoot green again” suggests a triumph over death or at least a rebirth; this image is somewhat muddied by the fact that Heaney describes these greening rushes as “scapulars” to drape his cousin’s shroud, utilizing pointedly Catholic imagery in a way that might suggest a lingering Catholic nationalism despite the tone of hope and regeneration that closes the poem.)

Heaney’s use of the pastoral from this point on relies increasingly on images of hopefulness and restoration, suggesting that the frightening fecundity of his earlier pastoral poems has been harnessed into something that can move beyond the powerful dichotomy of birth and death and into something else entirely: *rebirth* and *regeneration*, what Heaney himself has called the impulse to break the cycle of violence. If the early abject pastoral offered Heaney a space of powerful, even radical anti-colonial resistance, then Heaney’s more recent pastoral work takes a slightly different track, identifying instead hope—even in abject places.²⁴ The most famous example of this imagery occurs in *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney’s 1991 rendering of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*. Heaney writes:

²³ A tradition that is long-established and has been put to use by several of Heaney’s contemporaries. Most notably, Michael Longley’s 2002 collection, *Snow Water*, contains a series of pastoral elegies.

²⁴ Given that Kristeva argues that abject can never be fully eradicated, no matter how much Order is imposed, it is in keeping with these notions that Heaney does not write himself out of or away from abjection entirely—rather, it remains, but hope is found within it.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells. (305-306)

It is a decidedly earnest passage, and Heaney places it in the mouths of the Chorus rather than a character. At this point, the wells of his childhood, the personal helicons that were as likely to reflect back strange faces and strange voices, to be infested with rats, as they were with water, have changed, changed utterly—they are now the site of potential miracles, cures, healing.

The Chorus continues, driving home the point that nature can be a restorative because of its very fecundity:

If there's fire on the mountain
And lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term. (306)

From here forward, the overwhelming fecundity of nature is portrayed less in abject terms than as reproductive possibility—that the possibility for rebirth, for regeneration, is held in the very landscape that, for the first few decades of his career, Heaney could only portray as potentially fearful. The cynics among us might ask if this track is as powerful as the embrace of abjection, of the fearsome femininity of Heaney's early work. And the truthful among us might speculate that no, perhaps something is lost of that early, vibrantly fecund abjection of the bogs and wells,

man-eating goddesses and creeping rot. However, even though Heaney's work shifts, he does not abandon the abject pastoral entirely—rather, he finds hope within it, despite it, alongside it.

The shift in Heaney's work could be attributed to many factors: the growing peace movement in Northern Ireland that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998²⁵; Heaney's increasing distance from the bloodied grounds of Northern Ireland, both temporally and spatially; his own growth and maturation, both in age and in poetic prowess. In all likelihood, each factor played a role in the shift from abjection to hope in Heaney's presentation of the pastoral. In the final pages of this chapter, I offer a reading of some of Heaney's more recent forays into pastoral writing. In particular, I focus on 2002's *Electric Light*, and the three eclogues that Heaney includes in that collection. The eclogues mark yet another turn in Heaney's now long and varied career, and in my reading of them I suggest that Heaney uses the pastoral in a different way in *Electric Light* than he does in his earlier works. Like "The Strand at Lough Beg" and *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney is most intensely focused on the possibility of creation in the *Electric Light* eclogues, finding in abjection the potential for hope.

Eclogues and Elegies: Shifting Notions of the Pastoral in Heaney's More Recent Work

Electric Light (2002) opens with the spare simplicity of "At Toomebridge," a beginning that establishes place and tone, nods to both past and present. Toomebridge, Heaney writes, is "where the flat water / came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh" (3). But it is more than that. It is:

Where the checkpoint used to be.
Where the rebel boy was hanged in '98.
Where negative ions in the open air

²⁵ America, perennially fond of the Irish (and the number one source of funding for the IRA, incidentally), has graciously taken credit for much of the work done to accomplish the Good Friday Agreement. The above-quoted passage from *The Cure at Troy* supposedly hung in Bill Clinton's Oval Office, proof that poets have a place in politics.

Are poetry to me. As once before
The slime and silver of the fattened eel. (3)

With “At Toomebridge,” Heaney gives a nod to the colonial past, acknowledging that its “negative ions” become the source of poetry—in contrast to the “slime” that made up the poetry “once before.” It is an auspicious beginning to *Electric Light*, a collection where Heaney trods through a painful and bloody history in search of new hope and life—continuing the shift from abjection to hope that I have argued began to occur with “The Toome Road” and continued through *The Cure at Troy* and beyond.

Much of *Electric Light* can be considered pastoral, and indeed a much longer study of this collection as pastoral writing would be a productive endeavor. For my ends, however, I wish to look only at one of the three eclogues that Heaney includes in the collection. Each one continues the shift from abjection to hope that I have outlined elsewhere, and each brings into conversation the issues of a colonial past, a poetic present, and a lingering fecundity that speak to the abjection of his earlier pastoral works. It is the first of the three eclogues, however, “Bann Valley Eclogue,” that most directly addresses Heaney’s shift from abjection to hope.

Ian Twiddy, when writing of the pastoral bent in *Electric Light*, notes that “the eclogue in particular is concerned with things passing, whether lost love, the changing seasons, or dispossession and the loss or alteration of nature itself” (51). Despite that elegiac bent, however, Twiddy finds in the eclogues of *Electric Light* more cause for hope than despair: “Heaney’s recent work has examined the ability of the eclogue and the pastoral elegy to unlock cycles of violence and stalemate, and to advance the possibilities of integration” (52). That hope for the future, for an escape from a cycle of violence, is most present in the first of the three. “Bann Valley Eclogue,” written on the occasion of Heaney’s niece’s pregnancy, travels in just such

hopeful territory. Written as a conversation between a poet and Virgil, “Bann Valley Eclogue” is both sharp and sweet, pointed and hopeful.

The poet begins by asking the “Bann Valley Muses” for a “song worth singing,” something that will please his “hedge-schoolmaster Virgil / and the child that’s due” (12). The inclusion of Virgil as a hedge-schoolmaster is a particularly Irish twist on the classic form, as hedge schools were the secret, always-relocating schools for Catholic children, where they might learn to speak Irish, among other things, always hidden from the watching eye of the Crown. Despite casting Virgil as the hedge-schoolmaster, there is hope for the unborn child, the poet suggests: “Maybe, heavens, sing / better times for her and her generation” (12).

Virgil’s response is to acknowledge what the poet wants, a call for “poetry, order, the times, / the nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth / and a flooding away of all the old miasma” (12). And, indeed, the old schoolmaster seems inclined to grant such a renewal, although not without reminding the poet of his own culpability in the pain of the past:

Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves:
Earth mark, birth mark, mould like the bloodied mould
On Romulus’s ditch-back. But when the waters break
Bann’s stream with overflow, the old markings
Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.
The valley will be washed like the new baby. (12)

The marks of the past, marks of abjection or pain, sorrow or tribulation, are not without fault, Virgil counsels—but, too, they can be washed away, when the “waters break,” either metaphorically or when childbirth begins, those marks of the past will be washed clean. The poem, however much Heaney tethers it to Irish soil with the waters of the Bann and the image of Virgil conducting lessons at a hedge school, moves beyond the borders of Ireland all the way to Gaza, where the “east bank” will no longer be kept “from west.”

Virgil offers a sort of baptismal prayer for the unborn child, prophesying that “eclipses won’t be for this child” (13). “She’ll lie on summer evenings listening to / a chug and slug going on in the milking parlour. / Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions” (12). It is a particularly Irish desire, and one that the poet is loath to trust completely. “Why,” he asks Virgil,

Do I remember St. Patrick’s mornings,
Being sent by my mother to the railway line
For the little trefoil, untouchable almost, the shamrock
With its twining, binding, creeper, tough thin roots
All over the place, in the stones between the sleepers. (13)

In the poet’s recollection creeps the abjection of both the colonial past and Heaney’s past pastorals, where the image of the shamrock, that most Irish of Irish plants, is seen as overly fertile and frightening, twining and binding, the overwhelming fecundity that might threaten to swallow whole whatever lies in its wake. But, ultimately, the poet must take Virgil’s prophesy as it stands, because, whether the fearful memory of creeping shamrocks is present or not, “Child on the way, it won’t be long until / You land among us” (13). The poet chooses hope over fear, hoping, as Twiddy points out, to unlock cycles of violence, to imagine a world without “close gunfire or explosions.” Abjection is never fully eradicated—as the shamrock’s creeping “tough thin roots all over the place” attest—but Heaney’s newer poetry, as “Bann Valley Eclogue” exemplifies, endeavors to find hope despite it.

In this chapter, I have worked not only to outline the shifting presence and function of the pastoral in Heaney’s oeuvre but also to trace the patterns of abjection throughout his work and to place Heaney’s abject pastoral in relation to and in conversation with postcolonial ecocriticism. It has been my intention to look at how abjection has served different purposes throughout Heaney’s work, from the early pastoral poems where the abject looms large and overwhelming, to the later work where the abject cannot be eradicated, but might be acknowledged and accepted

within a larger shift toward hope for the future. Additionally, it has been my goal to raise throughout the chapter the role that gender has played in the landscape that Heaney presents, moving beyond the accepted conversations about Ireland's representations as a female body or female deity and into the realm of abjection, where femininity is neither weak nor chaste, but instead potentially powerful and even radical, a force that cannot be contained—either by colonizers or by Heaney himself. This chapter functions more as an overview of Heaney's entire career than a concentrated study of a particular series of poems, and seeks to set the stage for the following chapter, which is focused entirely on the bog poems of 1975's *North*.

CHAPTER 2. FEMME FATALE: HEANEY'S VIOLENT FEMALE PASTORAL

In Chapter One, I argued that Heaney's pastoral vision is ultimately an abject one, reliant on a landscape that is fraught with images of rot and excess, overly fecund and fertile spaces where the "good" and "natural" fertility of nature is thwarted by its own excess and rendered frightening and even dangerous. In this chapter, I argue that the bog poems of Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) are the fever pitch of Heaney's preoccupation with abjection.²⁶ The poems that came before *North* were leading up to the bog poems, and the poems that came after present a version of the pastoral that begins to move past the crushing weight of abjection that carries the day in *North*. But here, in the bog sequence that has made *North* arguably Heaney's most famous collection of poetry, abjection rules.

It is hard to read *North* as something other than resistance poetry—Heaney makes more direct references to the Troubles and to England's presence in Northern Ireland here than anywhere else in his body of work—and almost unanimously, critics and scholars have considered *North* through a political lens. However, few scholars have written extensively about the roles of gender and environment in the bog poems—and fewer still have considered how gender and environment shape the form that resistance takes in *North*. I wish to foreground those considerations in this chapter, thinking specifically about how a gendered landscape—particularly an abject landscape like the one Heaney creates in the bog poems—works in terms of postcolonial resistance writing. In this chapter, I argue that the resistance and subversion we find in the bogs, and in the frightening females who inhabit and embody them, is fleeting at best, and crippled by patriarchy at worst. In Heaney's bogs, women are caught in the crosshairs as the

²⁶ To be clear, the "bog poems" in *North* refer to the poems in which Heaney writes about the Bronze and Iron Age bodies that were discovered in Irish and Danish bogs during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Heaney's primary source material for the poems was P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1965).

Kristevan notion of the abject feminine is both the mode of resistance and the thing that must be rejected to uphold order. As a male poet, Heaney occupies a precarious position, both aligning himself with the feminine and feminized bogs of Northern Ireland and existing, as he cannot help but exist, as a male poet, the digger and excavator of the bogs, who by his very role as poet is attempting to speak for the subaltern bog queens he writes into existence. In this uneasy balance hangs the possibility for either subversion or oppression—often both. Through this very specified and local reading, I wish to flesh out a broader notion (with implications, I hope, that might reach beyond Ireland) of what I am terming abject resistance—and interrogate how gender is framed and located within resistance movements. Particularly, I argue that Heaney’s abject pastoral space of the bogs utilizes a dangerous femaleness—one which lies at the heart of Kristeva’s definition of the abject, an eternally frightening, dangerous, and powerful maternity—as the onus for pastoral resistance.

At first glance, Heaney’s presentation of gender is not complicated in *North*—and indeed, some critics have taken him to task for operating so staunchly within gender binaries.²⁷ In “Act of Union,” for instance, Heaney traverses much-covered ground in his presentation of England/male, Ireland/female, taking on the voice of the colonizing British as he notes, “I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder / That you would neither cajole nor ignore” (120). There is nothing new in Heaney’s characterization of England as “imperial male,” and yet as he continues, the metaphor extends:

[I leave] you with the pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.
The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column

²⁷ In an example that is representative of some of the criticism that has been leveled against Heaney’s portrayals of gender in *North*, Patricia Coughlin has argued that *North* is dangerously gendered, presenting a feminine that exists only to define the masculine. (See “Bog Queen: The Representation of Women in Seamus Heaney and John Montague.”)

Whose stance is growing unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum
Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
At me across the water. No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again. (120)

In his depiction of Ireland as not just a woman's body terrorized by a male colonizer, but also as a space of potentially dangerous regeneration, Heaney wades here into radical abject pastoralism, where the landscape of Ireland is presented not simply as female, but as a mother-destroyer, a femme fatale capable of producing violent and rebellious offspring—a child with a “wardrum” heart whose fists are “cocked” like guns, whose hands “beat” at both the borders of his mother and his colonizer/father.

Is there something subversive in such imagery? Is this imagery a space for potential radical resistance, or is it simply Heaney-as-male-poet, recycling an old trope of male/female, colonizer/colonized? The imagery, after all, is complicated at best, as the offspring Ireland produces as a result of England's rape and pillage is powerful but “parasitical,” even “ignorant.” Again, in keeping with the abject fecundity of Chapter One, the offspring produced by such a violent union, in such a violent landscape, is dangerous at best. Is there a place within this construct for radical resistance?

The answer lies in the first four lines of the poem. Heaney begins:

Tonight, a first movement, a pulse,
As if the rain in bogland gathered head
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny bed. (120)

Heaney points to the landscape, “bogland” itself, as the nexus for a radical re-imagining, a “pulse” of anti-colonial action that is rooted in an abjectly pastoral landscape. The bog will

burst, Heaney says, offering up a terrible birth, where the “gash” that breaks open is both vaginal and national, metaphoric and environmental. Like the terrible beauty born in Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” the language and imagery used here to narrate resistance is powerfully, dangerously maternal. “Act of Union,” like the bog poems that I will discuss throughout this chapter, walks the razor’s edge of abjection, where Heaney identifies in the abject landscape of Ireland a potential for radical anti-colonial resistance—and where he, as well, as male-poet-and-bearer-of-words, must butt up against the unknowable and fearful notion of woman.

Welcome to Bogland

Most critics point to *North* as Heaney’s pivotal text, a watershed moment in Heaney’s career, and Heaney himself has noted that the bog poems of *North* are where all the prior poems were heading, “the book all books were leading to” (qtd in Potts 56). The bogs become not only the culmination of the ideas put forth in previous poems but also the primary and primal location for all the concepts Heaney was striving towards before *North*. The essence of the pastoral, the quintessence of all the metaphors for digging into Irish soil, for peering into Irish wells—for every image Heaney ever conjured that suggested some insight could be gained by turning one’s gaze inward, looking inside the natural landscape, the bog poems offer the ultimate imagery for such an introspectively pastoral gaze. The bog poems, put simply, “have origins in the digging metaphor,” as Eugene O’Brien notes (15).

O’Brien writes of the bog poems as a two-pronged metaphor, wherein the land is both physical and national:

In all of these [bog poems], there is a double perspective, a binocularity of vision—of the land as a physical entity, which hoards items and objects from the past within itself; and of the land as symbolic of the psychic racial memory of the nationalist consciousness, with the objects that have been excavated becoming symbolic of images of pain and victimhood which have been hoarded within the psychic memory. (15)

O'Brien's doubling of the bog as both physical space and national memory offers a perspective others have envisioned, as well; Sabina Muller posits a similar doubling, among other critics. And, certainly, the bogs offer Heaney a space to transcend both space and time, "digging" through the past with a very physical metaphor.²⁸ In my reading of the bog poems, however, I am less interested in looking at how the bogs offer a doubling of national consciousness and physical landscape, as other scholars before me have already taken up this task, and instead I seek to illustrate how the bog poems, and their physical and psychic space, utilizes a violent femaleness as a space of radical pastoral resistance.

In all of the bog poems, Heaney meticulously, almost neurotically details each corpse's physicality, putting careful weight to each descriptor, never letting the audience forget for a moment that the bodies being pulled from the bog are just that—physical bodies, with all the foibles and delicate vulnerabilities that such embodiment entails. For instance, in "The Grauballe Man," the first of the bog poems to appear in *North*, Heaney presents what is nearly a laundry list of physical descriptors:

The grain of his wrists
Is like bog oak,
The ball of his heel

Like a basalt egg.
His instep has shrunk
Cold as a swan's foot
Or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge
And purse of a mussel,
His spine an eel arrested
Under a glisten of mud.

²⁸ Muller, in particular, works through the gendered and phallic notions of digging/excavating/drilling/fucking that drive so much of the action of the bog poems.

The head lifts,
The chin is a visor
Raised above the vent
Of his slashed throat

That has tanned and toughened.
The cured wound
Opens inwards to a dark
Elderberry place. (110)

The body Heaney describes is both familiarly, even boringly, clinically physical (wrists, heels, hips, spine, chin, throat) and relentlessly part of the landscape, as the details of the body are made part and parcel of the bog itself. The body consists of bog oak, swamp root, a mussel, an eel; the line between landscape and physical remains grows murky, as the body becomes the bog, and the bog becomes the body. The Grauballe Man, Heaney says, “lies on a pillow of turf / and seems to weep / the black river of himself” (110). Such a self-reflexive description, to weep a river of one’s self, speaks to the seamless intermingling of body and bog that Heaney emphasizes throughout these poems. There is, for Heaney, little to no separation between body and bog—or between Ireland and Irishman. Landscape becomes not just a metaphor for identity, but the vehicle for embodiment itself. As the abject pastoral becomes, with the bog poems, also the literal embodiment of what it means to be Irish, we find in that abject space the potential for both powerful resistance of Order and a troubling tendency toward the reinforcement of gender norms.

Such a doubling of the body and bog comes to a head when Heaney speaks of the “cured wound” of the Grauballe Man’s slashed throat, a wound that “opens inward to a dark elderberry place”—what we might just as easily read as a “gash,” a vaginal gaping wound that opens inward to a dark and “earthy,” “natural” womb—the body has become the bog. The metaphor of the body as bog and the bog as vagina continues as Heaney describes the Grauballe Man’s

“rusted hair” as “a mat unlike as a foetus’s,” and his body “bruised like a forceps baby” (111). In blending the body and bog together so seamlessly, in positioning the bog as a vagina/womb within the feminine earth of Ireland, Heaney places himself in a precarious position—as the poet/excavator who has dragged the Grauballe Man to light, we are left to wonder what role Heaney himself has been cast into—the “artful voyeur”²⁹ peering into the secrets of the bog, or the doctor/excavator, wielding tools and forceps, pulling forth unwillingly the contents of the bog? In either case, Heaney has written himself into the role of the patriarch, the doctor/excavator associated, at least stereotypically, with colonial power.

Whether we absolve Heaney of exploitation in exposing the contents of the bog or not, we must at least credit him with understanding and acknowledging the ambivalent reality of what it means to pull forth these bodies from their resting place and expose them, what it might mean to speak for someone who has been silenced so long, as he writes that the Grauballe Man lies “perfected in my memory/ ... hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity” (111). The relentless physicality of the Grauballe Man, the unapologetically vaginal womb of the bog, tips the scales between beauty and atrocity—walking the razor’s edge of abjection, that fascinating spectacle that fascinates us precisely because it horrifies us. The bog bodies, as Heaney represents them to us, become potentially powerful, but they are ultimately also offered up for our consumption—we want to read the bog poems because we want to see those bodies exposed before us. In this unapologetic celebration of the spectacle of the body, the Grauballe man’s the body becomes part of the bog, inseparable from it—and the bodies in the bogs becomes gendered in powerful, problematic ways.

I have read the bog poems, and the bodies within them, as abject bodies and spaces, which is to say, if we follow Kristeva’s definition of the abject, that these bodies and spaces are

²⁹ As Heaney refers to himself in another of the bog poems, “Punishment.”

ultimately always feminine—even when the body itself is sexed male, as the Grauballe Man is. Kristeva figures abjection in many ways, and it is for her ultimately always a feminine enterprise, but one which is always “outside the pale”³⁰—a notion that can exist wherever Structure, the Symbolic Order, exists. She writes that the abject is

What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior . . . Abjection . . . is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it. (4)

It is through this definition that we can locate the bodies—placed in the bogs, as they were, as offerings up to a fertility god, literally victims of murder who were offered up as sacrifices, as saviors. And, too, we find in Heaney’s representation of the bodies a curious kind of passion. One of the most discussed aspects of Heaney’s treatment of the bog bodies and the uncomfortable gendering that occurs in the bogs is the eroticization, the near-fetishization, of the bodies and the space itself. Henry Hart has called *North* a text about “death, sex, and a gruesome fusion of the two,” in which Heaney “lingers with erotic fondness on victims of ritual killings, knowing all the while that their deaths were inspired, ironically, by myths of sexual fertility” (387). For Hart, Heaney’s inspection of the dead leads to a simple, if horrific, conclusion: “[Heaney] examines ‘dead relations’ at funerals, dead Vikings lying in the ‘belly of stone ships,’ Irish famine victims, sacrificial corpses preserved in Irish and Danish bogs, and casualties of sectarian feuds in Northern Ireland and concludes that Mother Ireland is a *femme fatale*, seducing her devotees to violent death” (388). And, for Hart, Heaney’s representation of the bogs as a physical manifestation of a greedy, devouring monster-mother version of Ireland is not out of

³⁰ A specifically Irish-colonial phrase, referring to the area outside of Dublin. “Beyond the pale” offers a fine example of boundaries and boundary crossings (*a la* Kristeva) that have been so crucial to the colonial figuring of Ireland.

line with the Irish republican sentiments of the day. Hart quotes Heaney himself writing in the *Listener* about the connections between the ancient bog bodies and the Troubles:

You have a society in the Iron Age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. (qtd in Hart 88)

In *North* and the IRA resistance, a feminine religion, a feminine mythos, is both celebrated and feared—and bodies become gendered female in ways that are both powerful and limiting.³¹ The feminine body is exalted and becomes a vehicle for resistance, while at the same time it is never out of the control of men—whether Heaney writes himself as the poet/excavator/doctor who ultimately holds sway over the feminine/vaginal bog that is Mother Ireland, or whether the IRA protestors use the abject, and thus feminine, realities of the own bodies as tools for radical resistance while still seeking to control the bodies of women “in their stead,” either by shaving the heads of Catholic women dating British soldiers or by refusing to allow republican women the opportunity to participate in hunger strikes or go on the blanket. Ultimately, Heaney walks a

³¹ Perhaps the most famous example of the “fury of Irish Republicanism” is the hunger strikes of 1981. However, the IRA prison protests actually began a decade earlier, and were the result of a slow boil of republican frustration with what IRA political prisoners viewed as increasingly hostile British policy toward inmates following the outbreak of the Troubles. The prison protests encompassed both “blanket” and “dirty” protest, which were, respectively, a refusal to wear prison-issued garb (opting instead to go naked and/or shuffle about wearing nothing but blankets), and a reaction to the withdrawal of prisoner toilet facilities. Reduced to using chamber pots, which the prisoners assert were routinely dumped on their mattresses, the IRA detainees responded by beginning what became known as “dirty protest.” Dirty protest meant no emptying of chamber pots (except perhaps onto the walls of their cells or out in to the hallways of the prison), no showering, and no shaving. With these methods in place, the IRA prisoners had reduced themselves to their essential, corporeal beings—dirty, unwashed bodies, and the waste produced by those bodies—on constant display in front of their British guards. These corporeal, material protests ultimately led to the hunger strikes of 1981. In many senses a natural continuation of blanket and dirty protest, the hunger strikes certainly represent the ultimate form of bodily protest—the refusal to ingest food. In a relay-line of strikers, ten men died on hunger strike in Long Kesh prison, including the iconic Bobby Sands. Margaret Thatcher ruled their deaths suicides and refused to negotiate. See Tim Pat Coogan's *The IRA: A History*, Bobby Sands's *Writings from Prison*, and Bobby Morrison's *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike* for more information regarding the protests.

tightrope between a radical embrace of abjected femininity and a patriarchal attempt to bring such wild femaleness under control. He presents, Hart says, “a fascinated horror which portrays the victims of atrocity with anatomical specificity, mulls over myths compelling those atrocities, and also guiltily recoils from the ‘artful voyeurism’ and mystery cults that, on one level, attract him” (403).

“Come to the Bower”³² marks one such ambivalent mix of attraction and guilt, and finds Heaney playing the role of archaeologist as he digs up the “dark-bowered queen” who has been buried within the bog. She is revealed from the “black maw / of the peat,” because the narrator “forages,” “unpins,” and “unwraps” her from the bog that has been her grave (31). Heaney’s verb choices resonate here, creating a tone of uncomfortable exposure, and we feel the pull of the abject as the thing we cannot quite name, cannot quite resist. As the audience, are we in collusion with the poet-turned-archaeologist who dares to disturb the queen? The audience is forced to wonder if they have any right to watch as the narrator

Unwrap[s] skins and see[s]
The pot of the skull,
The damp tuck of each curl

Reddish as a fox’s brush,
A mark of a gorget in the flesh
Of her throat. And spring water
Starts to rise around her.

I reach past
The riverbed’s washed
Dream of gold to the bullion
Of her Venus bone. (31)

There is something poignant, something private, about exposing the skull of the body, the “damp curl” of her hair, the marks on her throat. The corpse is exquisitely personal, private, and to have

³² It should be noted that “Come to the Bower” is the title of a popular republican/nationalist Irish folk song, a connection that Heaney surely expects his audience to make.

unearthed it seems a violation, a crossing of boundaries (within/without the earth itself, the boundary between the living and the dead) for which neither we as audience nor Heaney as poet have been given permission. When the poet reaches for the corpse's "Venus bone," we hold our breath, reeling from the implications of necrophilia, of violation, in the narrator's pull toward the power of female sexuality, what Kristeva would term the "maternal body in its most un-signifiable, un-symbolizable aspect"—like the bog itself (21). Again, gender is a vexed point here; the power of the bog is in its very femininity, its ability to enact birth and death; but as male poet/excavator/archaeologist/voyeur, Heaney can only access that power in so much as he is attracted to it, fascinated by it, implored to bring it under his control. It is a fleeting mode of resistance—a role that he can only inhabit briefly.

We can, I believe, read in "Come to the Bower" the feminine mythos that Heaney associates with Irish republicanism—and, indeed, we should read that connection through the title of the poem, which doubles as a republican folk song. In doing so, however, we are left with difficult questions. How accessible is that "feminine mythos" to Heaney? He has associated republicanism with, essentially, a feminine cult, and the bogs and their ritual sacrifices are certainly an early example of that. There is, in both the bogs and republican resistance, an enormous well of potential, resistant power. However, Heaney's connection to that power is fleeting at best—he is, in "Come to the Bower," ultimately the excavator coming upon the feminine fury of Ireland-as-bog—not himself able to occupy such a position. His tenuous and troubling interplay with the bog body, with his reach toward her "Venus bone," we are left to wonder, how accessible is feminine power? It is a question Heaney, and *North*, never fully answer, despite how Heaney grapples with it.

This fleeting ability to enact this mode of resistance remains true throughout the bog poems, even when Heaney goes so far as to speak not of but through the bog bodies. In “Bog Queen,” particularly, Heaney gives voice to the woman of the bog, specifically to her body. The poem is written from the perspective of the queen herself, focused on her physicality that has been preserved in the depths:

My body was braille
For the creeping influences:
Dawn suns groped over my head
And cooled at my feet,

Through the fabrics and skins
The seeps of winter
Digested me,
The illiterate roots

Pondered and died
In the cavings
Of stomach and socket. (32)

Here both the queen and the bog itself are figured as physical beings—the passing of time is written over the queen’s body as “braille,” and we see the effects of her encasement on her head, her feet, her stomach, her sockets. As in “The Grauballe Man,” however, “Bog Queen” enacts a fascinating doubling where the bog itself is also a body, one whose “seeps of winter” can digest the queen whole, feeding on her flesh. The bog, the land, becomes a distinctly female monster, a sort of vagina dentata that can open and give birth to the “bog queen” and simultaneously engulf her in a monstrous, maternal cannibalism. Later the queen speaks of the “crock” of her pelvis, the “soft moraines” of her breasts (33). She feels coldness “like the nuzzle of fjords / at my thighs,” and her skull “hibernates” in the “wet nest of her hair” (33). Heaney’s voice of the bog queen insists on her own physicality, her embodiment in her tomb, refusing to let the audience forget that she is a physical corpse, a specimen grotesquely preserved. At the most basic level,

the monologue Heaney writes for the bog queen works the same way the blanket protest worked at Long Kesh—the body is put center stage, unapologetically honest in its simultaneous fragility and power. And, of most interest to this project, is the way the body melds almost seamlessly with the environment. The landscape of Ireland itself—always already feminized as a colonized space—becomes powerful precisely because of that femaleness. The bog queen, and Ireland herself, carries authority because of the very femininity of her body. Hers is a dangerous, monstrous maternalism. We are reminded, I hope, of the power of mother Ireland to birth dangerous children that Heaney outlined first in “Act of Union,” when the offspring of colonized Ireland “cocked his fists” toward England and whose heart beat like a “wardrum.”

The bog queen’s discovery and subsequent excavation centuries after her death is also described in gruesome physicality, as she recounts,

I was barbered
And stripped
By a turfcutter’s spade (33)

Her recounting is historically correct, as her body was discovered by a farmer working in the peat. Even without the violent verbs (“barbered,” “stripped”), the image of the turfcutter’s spade is a troubled one—here the quaint, even archetypal images of the Irish peatcutter become fearfully masculine, violating, violent—particularly when the queen continues her story and confides that the farmer originally reburied her in the bog until “a peer’s wife bribed him” and she is removed from the bog. The “salt-of-the-earth” image of the Irish farmer is sullied, marred, as he is portrayed as in collusion with the (English) peers who have no qualms about disturbing the bog queen, excavating her and exposing her. It is a loss the bog queen feels keenly, noting, “The plait of my hair, / a slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut” (43). The queen is the victim of what we must assume is tribal violence in life, but in death she falls prey to the colonizing

power of the English, who are more than willing to disturb or even destroy the environment in order to get at whatever of value might be stored within it. For the bog queen, this is a violation that separates her, through the cutting of the birth-cord, from her monstrous bog-mother.

Heaney's re-enactment of the bog queen is both poignant and potentially troubling, as Heaney "borrows" her voice, raising obvious questions of authority and agency. Can a voice from the past be resurrected—or can it only ever be co-opted? In "The Rani of Sirmur," Gayatri Spivak addresses that very question as she explicates the archival presence and absence of the Rani, a woman who appears in archival material only when she is needed by either her British colonizers or her own patriarchal system. She is, Spivak says, "caught thus between patriarchy and imperialism . . . almost in an allegorical predicament" (267). If we read the bog as an archive (it is, after all, a historical record, one that Heaney takes it upon himself in *North* to excavate as an archaeological dig), then the bog queen comes to occupy a position curiously similar to Spivak's Rani. What rights to her body, to her voice, does Heaney have, whether we figure the bog queen as archival data or woman or offspring of a womb-like bog? And if, in co-opting them, Heaney is writing against empire, is his a noble acquisition of her voice, her body?³³ A necessary evil? Whatever conclusions we might draw about what happens to a resistance movement that silences or co-opts women's voices, it becomes clear in other poems that Heaney has wrestled with his own patriarchal guilt in such a move.

If we are made uncomfortable by the bog queen, by her body, her death, her birth/death in the bog, her abuse at the hands of her own countrymen and her colonizers, Heaney works to create an even more painful and vexed scenario in "Punishment," another bog poem in which the narrative voice shifts from the woman in the bog to the "artful voyeur" of a poet who describes

³³ And does it matter that the most striking similarity between the bog queen and the rani is that they are both queens? What does that position of privilege do to a reading of abjection?

her. The poet begins in sympathy with the woman, who has been strangled before being tossed in the bog, and he images that he can feel the noose around her neck, the wind on her naked body. He eroticizes that sympathy, though, as he imagines the wind “blows her nipples / to amber beads” (37). The images of death and eroticism mingle strangely as he continues,

Her shaved head
Like a stubble of black corn,
Her blindfold a soiled bandage,
Her noose a ring

To store
The memories of love. (38)

The invocation of love in the context of the noose wrapped around her fragile neck is frightening, dangerous—what love might be harbored by a noose? The threat of sexualized violence looms and the threat is made real when the narrator continues, speaking now directly to the woman in the bog:

Little adulteress,
Before they punished you

You were flaxen-haired,
Undernourished, and your
Tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
But would have cast, I know,
The stones of silence. (38)

Historians have suggested that the ritualized nature of the murdered bodies suggests that the victims were being punished, presumably for adultery. Heaney’s words pack a double punch, however, as they suggest the contemporary sectarian violence of Northern Ireland. As discussed earlier, IRA soldiers in Belfast sometimes shaved the heads of women who dared to date British soldiers, shaved their heads and then tarred and feathered them. Heaney’s narrator is

torn between sympathy and silence, guilt and revenge, and he does not extricate himself from the conflict with the close of the poem. Instead, he further implicates himself:

I who have stood dumb
When your betraying sisters,
Cauled in tar,
Wept by the railings,

Who would connive
In civilized outrage
Yet understand the exact
And tribal, intimate revenge. (38)

The speaker of “Punishment” acknowledges that the proper response such violence is “civilized outrage,” but cannot bring himself to condemn it fully. It is an understandable punishment for the “little adulteress,” the “betraying sister.” Here the bog has become an uncanny reflection of contemporary life, an archive that houses both the past and a metaphoric retelling of the present, and the narrator seems helpless to do anything but reenact the violence again, wavering between his identification with the feminized bog and its contents and with his masculine desire to punish the “little adultress,” to uphold the Symbolic Order even as he simultaneously identifies with that which threatens it.

In significant, fascinating ways, “Punishment” recreates a strange and terrible version of the *aisling*, the myth of the Irish poet and his muse. Traditionally, the *aisling* is the story of an Irish poet encountering a woman who embodies the spirit of Ireland. In some versions the woman is young and beautiful (in which case the poet sleeps with her) and in other, non-sexual cases she is old and haggard (i.e. Cathleen ni Houlihan, the old woman of Ireland). In either version, the poet’s encounter with the woman generates creativity and the woman functions as a muse. In “Punishment” the woman/Ireland/*aisling* is both a muse and a victim, falling prey to

tribal revenge, the voyeuristic exposure of a traumatic birth when the earth is excavated, and the phallic gaze of the poet when Heaney's narrator is unable to resist condoning her victimization.

In "Strange Fruit," the next in the bog poem sequence, we do find a mark of relief from the relentlessly violent and patriarchal excavation of the bog/archive. The title of the poem itself resonates deeply, as it is the title of Billie Holiday's most famous song, condemning the "strange fruit" born by the trees in the American South—that is, the bodies of lynched African Americans³⁴. Here, the bog bears fruit that is equally strange and violent. The narrator highlights the exploitative nature of the excavation of the bog in "Strange Fruit," describing "the girl's head like an exhumed gourd" (39). He seems all too aware of the violation that removing her body from the archive commits: "They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair / And made an exhibition of its coil, / Let the air at her leathery beauty" (39). Here we find some measure of respite, however, when by the poem's end the victim has regained a measure of agency. She is

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence. (39)

In all the bog poems, this is perhaps the only moment in which the inhabitants of the bog are able to exercise any of their own authority. Here the girl refuses to allow her excavators to beatify her, to interpret her, to graft on to her body some meaning of their own. In her death, she is the master of her own body, able to outstare any gaze placed upon her. Her resistance is a passive one, not linked to any speech act or violence; rather, it is a refusal to act at all that gives her power. In this sense, she embodies a type of resistance most like the IRA prison protests that were taking shape at the time that Heaney was writing *North*—her "outstaring" is a form of passive resistance similar to the blanket and dirty protests of the time period, where an embrace

³⁴ Holiday did not, however, write the song herself. It was originally written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish American.

of physical passivity drove the resistance movement—and came to a head with the 1981 hunger strikes which found the strikers embracing their own inevitable, passive death in an attempt to harness some control over their bodies. Through her very passivity (her ability to “outstare”), she asserts her own small but real power, outstaring even the poet himself, who might have wished to ascribe words to her, to speak for her, but finds he cannot³⁵. Here the contents of the bog resist interpretation, recreation, reproduction.

In the context of the bog poems, Heaney reads the bog as a contradictory space of boundary-crossings, heavily demarcated physically and culturally, a space where abjection seems nearly unavoidable. The bog becomes a curiously natural (that is, earthy, feminine) and unnatural (that is, resulting from human violence, masculinized) archive—the ultimate example of the abject pastoral that he had been writing toward in all of her earlier representations of Northern Irish landscape. The bog is figured not only as feminine, but as a woman’s body itself with a strange capacity for reproduction (as in the birth cord that is cut in “Bog Queen”). Heaney’s abject pastoral is not merely history writ large and small upon the female body, a phenomenon we have surely seen before. Rather, reading the bog-as-monstrous-feminine renders it a transitory space imbued with the powers of (re)production and resistance—a space that, ultimately, Heaney’s narrator both inhabits and eschews, idolizes and abjures. Like the dichotomy between the IRA protests in Long Kesh and the IRA’s treatment of Irish Catholic women who dare to cross political and ideological borders, Heaney maintains a tight rope act, teetering between a truly radical embrace of the powers of the feminine and a conservative repudiation of the same.

³⁵ For a contemporary theoretical approach, we might think of Rosemary Garland-Thomson’s *Staring* (2009), in which Garland-Thomson asserts that the power in such a loaded exchange as staring actually lies, paradoxically, in the hands of the staree, not the starrer. We could also look to Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), which explores passive resistance in multiple forms.

CHAPTER 3. PAUL MULDOON: PERFORMING THE PASTORAL

In writing about Seamus Heaney, and in reading the vast corpus of criticism about him and his work, one might lament that “the problem” with Heaney criticism is that his work is over-simplified—that he is seen as a salt-of-the-earth poet, so often categorized as earthy and natural, a poet of wells and bogs, squelchy frogs and creeping moss—a narrative that presents itself neatly for consumption without complication.³⁶ For Paul Muldoon, Heaney’s one-time student at Queen’s, the opposite has been true. If Heaney has been over-defined, Muldoon has been under-defined, pinned as a poet whose allusions and references are so vast as to be incomprehensible. Indeed, Muldoon has at times been defined by his own perceived ambiguity. He is difficult, elusive, hard to pin down. Entire articles have been devoted to Muldoon’s impenetrableness³⁷. And, in truth, Muldoon himself has sometimes encouraged such a reading of his work. He has been accused of being a show-off, and it’s hard to deny that charge when one reads a poem like “Capercaillies,” in which Muldoon delightedly forms the acrostic, “IS THIS A NEW YORKER POEM OR WHAT?” from the first letter of each line.

And so Muldoon is read as the anti-Heaney—someone far too concerned with *New Yorker* sensibilities to dabble with something as commonplace as the pastoral.³⁸ However, such a reading of Muldoon does him a profound disservice. In reality, the pastoral has played a huge role in Muldoon’s early work, and has been an important presence in his more recent offerings, as well. Muldoon’s pastoral, it is true, does not resemble Heaney’s—or Michael Longley’s,

³⁶ This is not to say that Heaney criticism has been without rigor; rather, it speaks to a certain accepted notion of what Heaney is and does that prevails in reviews and does permeate some scholarship.

³⁷ See for example Rajeev S. Patke, “‘Responsibility’ and ‘Difficulty’ in Paul Muldoon;” Andrew Osborn, “Skirmishes on the Border: The Evolution of Paul Muldoon’s Fuzzy Rhyme;” Michael Robbins, “Paul Muldoon’s Covert Operations.”

³⁸ And Muldoon *is* concerned with *New Yorker* sensibilities, of course; he’s been the Poetry Editor there since 2008.

Eavan Boland's, or Medbh McGuckian's, for that matter, if we wish to read Muldoon alongside his Northern Irish comrades.³⁹ Muldoon's pastoral is punctuated with play and performance, with smirking unreality and jocular subversion. For Muldoon, the pastoral becomes a platform, a stage from which to launch into a sometimes playful, sometimes searing critique of stereotypical constructions of "Irishness." A tradition like the pastoral, rooted as it is in the earth itself, offers Muldoon a space to critique the geopolitical landscape, purposely playing coy with the "culture under glass" that Oona Frawley identifies as endemic of Ireland—and common to many colonized peoples and places.⁴⁰ Muldoon's pastoral poems become cultural performances, reliant on "stock Irish" characters to enact sharp political points and play with stereotype and expectation—pushing back against any quaint notion of what might be seen as traditionally rural Irishness. In Muldoon's pastoral we can identify a doubled-edged engagement with the political that relies on what I have deemed pastoral performances—in short, I read in Muldoon's pastorals a tongue-in-cheek performance that both celebrates and sends up Irish tropes. These pastoral performances, populated by a cast of stock Irish characters equal parts lovely and loutish, offer moments where Muldoon can both engage and subvert the particular expectations placed upon Northern Irish poets to engage political issues—a set of expectations that we might identify for postcolonial writers in general.⁴¹ In particular, Muldoon uses either naïve narrators or father

³⁹ Reading Muldoon's pastoral poems alongside other Northern Irish poets can, in fact, present difficulty. Oona Frawley, after quoting a passage from Neil Corcoran about the heavy inscription of the Famine on the literal landscape of Northern Ireland and the figurative landscape of its poetry, comments off-handedly that "Paul Muldoon escapes such easy categorization" (139).

⁴⁰We might find equivalents in Navajo women hawking silver jewelry to tourists in the American Southwest, or Mayan children performing "traditional Spanish dances" for tourists as they shuffle off their Carnival cruise line in Mexico.

⁴¹ These pressures to engage the political are all too evident even in a superficial perusal of Northern Irish poetry criticism in the last twenty years: *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Clair Wills, 1994); *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Steven Matthews, 1997); *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (Jonathan Hufstader, 1999); *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland* (Richard Rankin Russell, 2010).

figures in these poems, tapping into a larger postcolonial trend (the use of child narrators, a focus on landscape) to produce his contribution to what Frawley has called the “necessarily hybrid” genre of the Irish pastoral.⁴²

In *The Roots of the Irish Pastoral Tradition*, Frawley writes of the British practice of “collecting and displaying ... exotic specimens from farflung colonies” as “in itself part of colonialism” (36). In this case, as in so many others, Ireland’s colonial connection to Britain manifests itself in a slightly different way, as Ireland is hardly “farflung” from the Crown. Rather, Frawley claims,

The establishment of museums ‘at home’ in Ireland would contribute to what has been referred to as a process of ‘internal colonialism,’ in which a country encloses in a museum its own cultural objects that are perceived as having passed from use and become obsolete. Irish museums, in other words, would testify to a certain defeat of elements of Irish culture and would admit to the passing of certain Irish cultural forms. The very idea of a museum in a colonial setting would encourage the belief that ‘native’ traditions were ‘past’, and would also provide a specious sense of comfort in that the lost culture was ‘preserved’ for all the see behind the glass cases of a museum. (36)

Astutely, Frawley points to this ‘internal colonialism’ being manifested as early as the eighteenth century in Ireland’s growing popularity as a tourist destination, where British vacationers could flock, Claud-glasses in hand, to gain a view of the picturesque “wilds” of Ireland. Irish landscape and culture becomes something to be consumed—a retreat from the bustle of London, an experience to be had. Much has changed in the intervening centuries, but the idea of Ireland as a cultural commodity, something to be experienced and seen and sold, remains.

We could point to examples of music and dance, certainly, as examples of how Irish culture has become a lucrative enterprise. For example, the rising fortunes of “Irish punk” bands like Flogging Molly and The Dropkick Murphys, who blend Irish folk music with punk rock

⁴² At the risk of overly self-referential behavior, my Master’s thesis, *Naïve Narrators: The Voice of the Child in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon* (Indiana State U, 2008), covered this issue particularly, and *The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Fiction* (Meenakshi Bahrat, 2003) focuses on children in postcolonial literature as a whole.

aesthetics and a working class, pro-proletariat, anti-establishment sentiment, certainly speak to an American (and European) taste for easily consumable Irishness. And, indeed, scholarship exists discussing the way that Irish cultural tropes and practices have become commercially available and sought after. Mark McGovern, writing about the commodification of pub culture in Ireland, argues that “the pub has emerged as the site for a form of cultural tourism in which a socially constructed conception of Irish people is consumed in a setting that allows for tourist escape, hedonism, and exploration” (83-84). McGovern’s chapter is a well-suited example of the kind of cultural commodification I’m referencing in this chapter: specifically, the occasion when a culture trope—in the case of McGovern’s claim about pub culture, that of the drunken and sociable Irishman—becomes part and parcel of tourist culture, less about “authenticity” than about a particular brand of Irish tourist experience. It is within and against this sort of cultural tourism, both within and without Ireland’s geographic boundaries, that I’d like to situate Muldoon’s use of cultural tropes and stereotypes, and his willingness to subvert, parody, and manipulate them. Ultimately, Muldoon plays both to and against such a notion of a culture neatly packaged for viewing and consumption.

Frawley’s idea of a “culture under glass” is echoed by other scholars, as well. In *Out of the Earth*, Christine Cusick writes that Ireland is “trapped in myth and romance, a landscape dehistoricized for consumption” (86). The museum-phenomena that Frawley identifies and Cusick points to as a veil of “myth and romance” amounts to a set of cultural practices that, far from preserving actual history, aestheticizes and commodifies cultural markers to create an easy narrative. Likewise, Colin Graham suggests that the “durability of authenticity” in Irish culture is linked to this “culture for consumption” mode (qtd in Cusick 88). For Graham, “authenticity”

becomes a product in and of itself, formed around the notion that “real” Irish culture can be viewed—and consumed—by tourists.

Interestingly, Graham finds in this commodified Irishness the possibility for, if not subversion, at least irony. He writes, “If we search for the truly unutterable, subaltern status in Irish culture, it may be that we meet it most clearly not in a ‘hidden’ Ireland, but in the obvious, crude, brash, blatant, and garish ‘Ireland’ all around us. Easily dismissed by analysis, it has the ability to undermine the very nature of critique itself and to throw the critical voice back at itself in a form of self-parody” (171). Graham uses Baudrillard’s conversations about kitsch to think about Irish culture and cultural presentation. For our purposes, though, it is enough simply to reflect on how Graham identifies in the cultural productions of commodified Irishness the opportunity for self-parody, as I argue that Muldoon finds that same opportunity for self-reflexive parody in the poems I’m discussing here.

Against this cultural phenomenon—the idea of Ireland existing on a stage, being viewed by tourists in a cute, kitschy, easy-to-swallow package that elides much of the reality of a colonial past—Muldoon’s conception of the pastoral takes flight. In poem after poem, Muldoon uses pastoral settings in order to play with notions of “authentic” Irishness—using, in particular, the figures of children and fathers, to mock and subvert the cultural expectations of Irish identity.⁴³ Throughout his body of work, Muldoon’s pastoral settings offer a platform for playing with cultural tropes, purposely manipulating and mocking the “culture under glass” that ends up making Irishness a commodity to be consumed, like so many Riverdance videos and “Kiss Me, I’m Irish” t-shirts. Muldoon’s often overlooked pastoral poems not only perform the “necessarily hybrid” function of memorializing landscape in a space scarred by empire, but offer

⁴³Acknowledging, of course, the inherent vagueness of a term like “Irish identity” and whatever such a broad phrase might encompass.

simultaneous critiques of the upshot of colonialism in Ireland—namely, a commodification of culture and cultural tropes.

Muldoon's very first collection, *New Weather* (1973), is populated by orchards, trees, rivers, gardens; the pastoral, the natural, and the rural are all part of the backdrop. However, in Muldoon's second collection, *Mules* (1977), the poet addresses head-on the idea of the pastoral, the importance and relevance of the rural, as a political issue. In "Lunch with Pancho Villa," Muldoon imagines sitting down with the famed Mexican revolutionary for a chat about the role of poetry in revolution—and poetry in politics, period. The situation presents fertile ground for consideration of a postcolonial pastoral, and what the political implications of such a space might be; after all, Pancho Villa led a revolution that saw farmers rise up against aristocrats, tenants revolt against landlords, the rural pit itself against the cosmopolitan. Pancho Villa delivers pointed advice to the poet:

'Look son. Just look around you.
People are getting themselves killed
Left, right and centre
While you do what? Write rondeaux?
There's more to living in this country
Than stars and horses, pigs and trees,
Not that you'd guess it from your poems.
Do you never listen to the news?
You want to get down to something true,
Something a little nearer home.' (41)

Pancho Villa's critical advice raises questions about, among other things, a poet's duty to write "something true" about the place in which they reside. Villa's imagined criticism, in fact, resembles the reception Muldoon has sometimes received by critics, as well, particularly as The Troubles continued to heat up in the 1970s. Critic Gavin Ewart praised Muldoon's work, but then added that his aesthetic seemed "better suited to light verse" than the political realities of Northern Ireland (115). Both Ewart's real criticism and Pancho Villa's imagined salvo against

Muldoon beg the question: what constitutes the political? What duty does a poet have to engage in it, once it has been defined? And can the local, the rural, offer a suitable platform from which to discuss the political? Placing the criticism of Muldoon's "stars and horses, pigs and trees" in the mouth of Pancho Villa suggests a certain irony—what, indeed, was Pancho Villa fighting for, if not the rural? In choosing Villa as his font of wisdom, Muldoon stacks the deck; the criticism he imagines being launched against himself for his reluctance to overlook rural subject matters is the height of irony coming from Pancho Villa, a champion of the rural. (If Villa's cause was eventually corrupted and lost—well, that is a story for another day.)

Of course, the inclusion of Pancho Villa is suspect in other ways, as well—namely, in the way that it finds Muldoon, the white westerner, seeking advice from the wise old Other, recreating what we might define as, essentially, the "magic negro," characterized by a stereotypical man of color who so kindly, selflessly guides white people to good fortune. And, to be fair, "Lunch with Pancho Villa" is not the only time when Muldoon has conjured up characters of color in order to wrestle through his own political issues. His fascination and identification with Native Americans has spanned his entire career, particularly in early offerings such as "Year of the Sloes," "Indians on Alcatraz," and others. However, if we can defend Muldoon's use of these characters of color (and I believe that we can), I would suggest that Muldoon is less concerned with finding "magical" solutions to his own problems than with finding, in other groups' struggles, parallels to his—and Northern Ireland's—own. Historically, the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland grew alongside and out of the civil rights movement in the American South. For Muldoon, and for a Northern Irish audience, the connections between people of color in America and Northern Irish Catholics at home would seem clear and well-wrought.

Ultimately in “Lunch with Pancho Villa,” Muldoon demures, choosing not to offer up any direct answers, instead imagining himself, years later, doling out advice to a young poet much as Pancho Villa did for him:

‘When are you going to tell the truth?’
For there’s no such book, so far as I know,
As How It Happened Here,
Though there may be. There may.
What should I say to this callow youth
Who learned to write last winter—
One of those correspondence courses—
And who’s coming to lunch today?
He’ll be rambling on, no doubt,
About pigs and trees, stars and horses. (42)

There is, of course, no way to recount “how it happened here”; however, “Lunch with Pancho Villa” suggests that, perhaps, a country’s “pigs and trees, stars and horses” offer as useful a platform for discussing the political as any other. And, simultaneously, “Lunch” finds Muldoon grappling with a question that he will continue to engage throughout his career in poems and interviews—what is a poet from a contested landscape “supposed” to write about?⁴⁴ “Lunch with Pancho Villa” prefaces Muldoon’s approach to the pastoral throughout his career—namely, as a place from which simultaneously to engage the political and subvert political expectations. And, in typical Muldoon fashion, these questions are raised only to be sent up in parody as well by the poem’s very title and premise. After all, what is further removed from revolution than the act of “doing lunch”?

In this chapter, I ultimately argue that the pastoral, for Muldoon, becomes a platform to enact cultural performances, play with tropes and stereotypes, thwart cultural expectations. In making this claim, I wish to think carefully about performance, particularly as Muldoon himself

⁴⁴ The issue of engaging the Troubles has been something Muldoon has dealt with throughout his career, commenting during an interview in 1981 that “the trouble of this place is that if you don’t engage in it, you’re an ostrich (whatever ‘engage in it’ means). If you do engage in it You’re on the make, almost, cashing in” (*In the Chair* 5).

has characterized it, before I go further. To understand how Muldoon utilizes performance, however, we must begin with a discussion of Muldoon's engagement with the political.

In a 1999 interview, Muldoon comments, "I think a writer's job is to be an outsider, to belong to no groups, no tribes, no clubs. So far as any of us can, it's to be a free agent, within the state of oneself, or roaming through the different states of oneself" (qtd in Barry 92). Muldoon expresses the belief that the poet should be an observer, a recorder, but never a spokesperson; to a large extent, Muldoon has accomplished just that in his own poetry. His reticence to engage directly the politics of Northern Ireland in his poetry is a testament to his own belief in what constitutes a poet's job, and it has often left him the target of criticism. Throughout his career, audiences, critics, and scholars have looked for politics within Muldoon's poetry (much as I am doing now); reviewers chided him for not having enough of it, particularly when addressing his earlier works. In a review of *Why Brownlee Left* (1980), Gavin Ewart opens with this dubious praise: "This is Paul Muldoon's third book of verse, and it's a very enjoyable one—though the content is often more conducive to the writing of light verse than the bitter realities of Northern Irish politics" (115). Early criticism, especially, is shot through with this vague dissatisfaction in Muldoon's refusal to take a definitive political stance. In a more perceptive review of *Why Brownlee Left*, Alan Jenkins closes his article by acknowledging the power of Muldoon's refusal to be forced into declaring a position:

And though it has its moments of anger and menace, Muldoon's poetry is most memorable for its art of gentleness. Such an art may seem irrelevant, even scandalous, to anyone making a firm stand on the ideological ground from Muldoon mocked himself (and, implicitly, the stand) in "Lunch with Pancho Villa." But the *actual* presence and weight of "history" is everywhere in these slender poems; it is, in fact, all the more powerfully present for being unsaid. (1287)

Although these two reviewers approach the subject differently, at the heart of both reviews we find readers who are looking for the presence of a political stance, or at least a gesture towards one, in Muldoon's work. Jenkins' reading is the subtler of the two, but the reviewers ultimately share a common interest in identifying the presence of politics in Muldoon's works. Audiences often demand political commentary on the part of their poets—particularly if they hail from a place as contested as Northern Ireland has been. How, then, does a poet like Muldoon, who expresses the belief that poets should “belong to no groups,” navigate such a problematic terrain? By eschewing politics altogether, if such a thing were possible, the poet risks disappointing critics but does not jeopardize his “outsider” status as a poet. However, as Jenkins points out, the presence of history remains omnipresent in Muldoon's work. And that history necessarily includes politics; after all, to talk of history is to engage politics, however indirectly. This is true for any poet, writing anywhere, and is doubly true in a region as rife with controversy as Northern Ireland has been.

Peter McDonald addresses the pervasive issue of cultural and political identity in Irish writing in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*:

The recognition that identity has become a commonplace, or some ways a cliché, in cultural and political discussion...is seldom made in Irish literary criticism. Here, identity often remains the goal of Irish writing, and the foundation of real literary achievement; a certain amount of bad contemporary writing, especially in the Irish Republic, takes the critical agenda of identity entirely seriously, and often comes down to no more than a series of roots proclaimed, allegiances declared, and set gestures rehearsed. [...] In Northern Ireland, fewer writers have been willing to make the (potentially lucrative) investment in identity which provides criticism with the correct answers to the pre-set questions. (5-6)

McDonald notes that few Northern Irish writers have been willing to engage directly in these topics, and Muldoon is no exception, as he too has avoided providing any “correct answers” to critical queries about Irish identity. Rather, he has played coy with such questions, poked fun at

their very existence. And, I argue, he has used the pastoral as one way to both engage and subvert such expectations.

In his academic work, Muldoon has also offered some solutions to the problem of engaging politics. Twice Muldoon mentions the concept of poetic “ventriloquism” in *To Ireland, I*, suggesting that one maneuver poets may make to speak of politics without speaking of politics is to employ a different voice. Discussing John Hewitt’s “The Colony,” Muldoon mentions this use of multiple voices: “I speak of Hewitt ‘throwing his voice’ through a Roman, a technique we think of as Browningsque. [...] The dramatic monologue allows Hewitt to say what would otherwise be unsaid, or unsayable, in polite society” (46). For Muldoon, Hewitt speaks through the voice of the Roman to make political commentary without jeopardizing the poet’s own status as an outsider, however contrived. Muldoon returns to the idea of ventriloquism later in the same text, as he discusses the “political love poem known as the *aisling*,” a genre at which Muldoon himself has tried his hand (“Aisling,” *Quoof*, 1983). Muldoon suggests that the genre lends itself well to the political voice-throwing he mentions earlier:

This delight in the idea of the “vision-voyage” coincides with a delight in ventriloquism, or voice throwing, that allows the individual to make manifest a multiplicity of points of view, including political points of view, allowing him or her the freedom to shape-shift with all the aplomb exhibited by Amergin himself, in what I again described previously as “his tireless reinvention of himself as stag or flood or wind or tear or hawk.” (*To Ireland, I* 73)

Muldoon identifies in the *aisling* an opportunity for poets to engage in political and social commentary without aligning themselves with any permanent ideology. This device of poetic ventriloquism, I suggest, presents itself throughout Muldoon’s own body of work—particularly when Muldoon writes in a pastoral mode. Using the pastoral as a very consciously Irish backdrop, Muldoon manipulates the genre through what we might as well call, as Muldoon

himself does, ventriloquism. In his pastoral poems, especially, Muldoon delivers a cast of characters—children, fathers, exotic strangers—which evoke cultural performances that allow Muldoon to play with and engage in social and political commentary—and poke fun at it in the process.

There is inherent risk in such maneuverings, of course; by not “showing his hand” and exposing a political leaning, a poet can be open to accusations of being superficial or insincere.⁴⁵ In an interview from 1981, Muldoon even comments briefly on his own use of poetic ventriloquism, noting, “I’m interested in ventriloquism, in speaking through other people, other voices” (*In the Chair* 188). The interviewer presses Muldoon further, asking, “Do you acknowledge my feeling that in a number of poems you’re trying to catechize certain received attitudes of the Irish, mythical and legendary...?” (*In the Chair* 188). Muldoon replies:

Yes, and this goes back to what we were saying about the voice: we mustn’t take anything at face value, not even the man who is presenting things at face value. For all our simplifications of the world—and a work of art is a simplification in terms of its process of selection, a continual reduction of the variables in what a thing might mean—that process of simplification must not become simplistic. We all know that if we try to nail a thing down it can pull the nail out and walk away, and perhaps that has something to do with my slyness and wryness. (*In the Chair* 189)

Although Muldoon is speaking here to a level of what critics might call obfuscation in his work in general, it speaks particularly, I believe, to his pastoral poems and the playfulness—wryness—with which Muldoon evokes the Irish landscape and rural life. Muldoon never presents a pastoral scene at “face value”; instead, they are populated with ventriloquisms meant not as evasions but as expressions that avoid the oversimplifications that he warns against here.

⁴⁵ One of the harshest reviews Muldoon has received suggested that 2002’s Pulitzer-winning *Moy Sand and Gravel* was merely “overinformed doggerel” (Peter Davison, “Darkness at Muldoon”). Of his next collection, *Horse Latitudes* (2006), Helen Vendler remarked that for all the collection’s technical prowess, there was “a hole in the middle where the heart should be” (“Fanciness and Fatality,” *The New Republic Online*).

Bearing in mind Muldoon's comments about poetic voice throwing as a method of engaging complexities, we can find evidence of this gesture at work in much of his poetry. Poems like "Lunch with Pancho Villa" and "7 Middagh Street" find Muldoon "speaking" through famous figures such as Pancho Villa, W.H. Auden, Louis McNeice, Benjamin Britton, Salvador Dali, Gypsy Rose Lee, and more. "Meeting the British," meanwhile affords Muldoon a Native American perspective from which to view the British colonizers, a position Muldoon explored in poems as early as "Year of the Sloes" (published in his first collection), in which he speaks first as the last remaining Yahi tribesman and later as a European colonizer. These poems are *overt* examples of Muldoon's occupation of a particular character; his own distinct brand of ventriloquism is also present, in a subtler form, in his pastoral poems populated by children and priests, fathers and drunken uncles. Just as Muldoon identifies in Hewitt's "The Colony" an act of voice throwing that allows Hewitt to discuss what would otherwise be unsayable, so do Muldoon's "Irish pastorals" afford him a position from which to speak that manipulates and subverts such constraints.

For Muldoon, as both a critic and a poet himself, the idea of using ventriloquism and voice throwing to adopt various viewpoints is common—and both of these terms could be deemed a kind of performance. Indeed, several reviewers have made comments on the element of performance present in Muldoon's poetry. John Lucas's review of *Meeting the British* is the best example of such an idea, as Lucas terms Muldoon's poems "wonderfully adroit performances" that do not "allow themselves to be docketed as this or that kind of Irish performance" (23). The word performance also crops up in Stephen Burt's review of *Hay* (1998). For Burt, the element of performance in Muldoon's work is not necessarily positive; Burt suggests that Muldoon "performs" when he is not being sincere. That is, Burt's idea of

performance is all show and little substance. He writes pointedly, “When Muldoon is simply performing, or bored, he won’t bother to replace the assumptions his endings demolish: the poem says, to subject and readers, ‘Whatever’” (3). Burt uses the idea of performance when considering the oblique, often difficult nature of Muldoon’s poetry, suggesting that many of the complexities presented in Muldoon’s work are the result of a bored, talented poet toying with his audience, “performing” his trade with an aim to dazzle, but not necessarily enlighten.

In contrast to Burt’s characterization of Muldoon’s performances as insincere, I would suggest instead that his “performances” (particularly, for this project, his pastoral performances) are actually genuine efforts to present a multiplicity of views. Of course, there is something inherently problematic about such voice-throwing; at what point does “presenting multiple views” become something akin to speaking for the subaltern? It is a tricky, slippery slope, one that puts Muldoon at risk, certainly, of appropriation. If there is a saving grace that rescues Muldoon from speaking for the subaltern—and I believe there is—it is that Muldoon takes great care to present, as he says, a multiplicity of voices. Muldoon cautions against oversimplification (“If we try to nail a thing down it can pull the nail out and walk away”); by presenting a variety of roles and perspectives, Muldoon avoids such an oversight.⁴⁶

In fact, Muldoon’s theoretical ideas about ventriloquism and voice throwing allude heavily to the idea of performance, even though he never names it explicitly as such. The performances of Irish cultural tropes in Muldoon’s pastoral poems afford the poet a space from which to speak that provides the paradoxical opportunity to both engage in political and cultural commentary and subvert the expectation to do so. The Irish landscape and rural life, in these

⁴⁶ An example of this, I think, would be the way that Muldoon voices the archetypal father figure throughout his pastoral poems. Sometimes the father figure is illiterate and superstitious—at other time he is educated, powerful, and polished. This multiplicity of voices and roles leaves us hard pressed to draw any firm conclusions; rather, we are presented a whole variety of potential characters and ideas.

poems, becomes a stage for which Muldoon to play out Irish mythos in such a way that both valorizes and mocks such conventions—pushing back against the “culture under glass” without overlooking its existence.

Naïve Narrators: Children Speaking the Pastoral

Although certainly not his only mode of utilizing the pastoral, a common pastoral theme in Muldoon’s work is that of the child. In poems voiced by child protagonists, Muldoon routinely presents pastoral settings in which those child protagonists encounter a rural idyll, a scene supposedly peaceful and nostalgic⁴⁷ that, through no fault of the child, becomes tinged with something darker, even potentially dangerous or menacing. In these spaces, children encounter shifting ideas of reality and “authenticity,” subverting those notions of what a cozy and quaint Irish pastoral setting should look like. In this section, I offer close readings of four such poems, their publication dates stretching from 1977 to 2002, to illustrate this trope as an enduring one throughout Muldoon’s career. In doing so, I argue that Muldoon’s use of this trope repeatedly offers him a position from which to both engage the pastoral (and the nostalgia that accompanies it) while also subverting the expectations of the genre, pushing back against Frawley’s idea of a culture under glass.

“Duffy’s Circus,” 1977

Chronicling a young boy’s experience with a traveling circus that has come to Moy, Muldoon’s childhood hometown, “Duffy’s Circus” is at once a poem about wonder and disgust, exoticism and baseness—and such grand themes play out on a particularly Irish, particularly rural stage. The narrator opens the poem by repeating his father’s nonchalant repudiation of the sideshow:

⁴⁷ And it is worth noting that Oona Frawley has suggested that for postcolonial writers, the pastoral is always a space of nostalgia, what she calls a “literal homesickness.”

God may as well have left Ireland
And gone up a tree. My father said so.
There was no such thing as the five-legged calf,
The God of Creation
Was the God of Love.

My father chose to share such Nuts of Wisdom. (*Poems 1968-1988* 66)

Although the narrator's father has warned him, quite humorously, of the dangers of the circus, the boy cannot contain his enthusiasm for the wonders that the circus tent holds for him. His father shares "Nuts of Wisdom" with his son, but the child confides to the audience:

Yet across the Alps of each other the elephants
Trooped. Nor did it matter
When Wild Bill's Rain Dance
Fell flat. Some clown emptied a bucket of stars
Over the swankiest part of the crowd. (*Poems 1968-1988* 66)

To the child speaker, it matters not at all that the cheap thrills of the Wild West show have failed to impress; instead, he compensates for Wild Bill's apparent weakness by impressing upon the audience the grandiosity of the rest of the performers. Through this child's gaze the plodding elephants become Alps, the clown's dirty bucket of confetti becomes stars, and the working class audience becomes aristocratic. The transformation that occurs here is one of perspective, as the child's wonderment colors what would be an otherwise shoddy scene.

Perhaps of equal importance to this scene is Muldoon's reliance on the accoutrement of other cultures in presenting a rural vision of Northern Ireland—the father warns his son of the vagaries of the traveling circus in a particularly Irish way ("God must have left Ireland and went up a tree"), but what the son sees—and so loves—is the presence of not-Ireland in Ireland: Wild Bill's rain dancing Indians, elephants whose broad backs become Alps, a sort of magical transformation of the quotidian into the exotic. Such transformations, such spectacles, are part

and parcel of Muldoon's early pastoral.⁴⁸ In presenting an Irish pastoral scene, Muldoon writes of a circus—a calculated performance of otherness meant to *seem* authentic, if not actually *be* authentic. His tongue is firmly in cheek, and we are swept along with the speaker's enthusiasm, trusting his depictions, if also being amused by them. At this point in the poem, however, the situation changes:

I had lost my father in the rush and slipped
Out the back. Now I heard
For the first time that long-drawn-out cry.
It came from somewhere beyond the corral.
A dwarf on stilts. Another dwarf.
I sidled past some trucks. From under a freighter
I watched a man sawing a woman in half. (*Poems 1968-1988* 66)

As the speaker moves further away from the staged performance of the circus, we are never quite certain of his motivations: has he sought the source of the “drawn-out cry,” or simply taken advantage of his father's absence to investigate his new and exotic surroundings? An element of ambiguity prevails here, as we never really know if the narrator seeks adventure or if it has been thrust upon him. At any rate, away from the safety of the big-top, he is exposed to the secret, adult world that exists behind it. His father's dire warnings about the circus suddenly seem founded. The very appeal of the circus, its potential for weirdness and spectacle, for all things not “natural,” is now frightening.

Suspense builds slowly toward the horrifying climax, as the speaker moves further into the recesses of the circus encampment, “sidling” past trucks and dwarfs to take refuge under a

⁴⁸ Elsewhere, I have mentioned Muldoon's use of tropes that could be read as spectacle-making, perhaps even Orientalist (perhaps especially in his treatment of American Indians). It's an issue Muldoon sidesteps often through his use of naïve narrators—and at other points through his earnest identification with the American Indian Movement. See poems like “Indians on Alcatraz,” “Year of the Sloes, for Ishi,” and “Meeting the British,” for examples from Muldoon's oeuvre, or articles such as “A Land ‘Not Borrowed’ but ‘Purloined’: Paul Muldoon's Indians,” by Jacqueline McCurry or “Playing Indian/Disintegrating Irishness: Globalization and Cross Cultural Identity in Paul Muldoon's ‘Madoc: A Mystery,’” by Omaar Henna for criticism regarding Muldoon's career-spanning fascination and identification with American Indians.

vehicle. From this vantage point he witnesses “a man sawing a woman in half,” a monstrous, misogynistic image made all the more troubling by its ambiguity. Has the speaker stumbled upon a magician’s rehearsal? Is the boy spying on an unsuspecting couple having sex? Or, most disturbing of all, is the man really sawing the woman in half? The very nature of the circus renders it apt subject matter for one of Muldoon’s reflexive pastoral performances, as the success of a circus depends on its ability to perform and mock expectations—and this cheap magician’s trick of sawing a woman in half plays right into Muldoon’s pastoral territory. In an interview I conducted with Muldoon in 2008, he suggested that the scenario the boy encounters might also be viewed as a legacy of Ireland’s colonization, commenting, “Ireland is sometimes depicted as a woman’s body, you know.”⁴⁹ In this reading, then, the colonization and later partition of Ireland becomes part of the exoticized performance, as well—just another aspect of Irish culture that can be played out on the stage.

Perhaps some would quibble with my characterization of “Duffy’s Circus” as a pastoral poem. There are certainly no sheep or shepherds here, and it is no celebration of a rural idyll. However, the poem is indicative of Muldoon’s version of the pastoral—a pastoral vision in which rural Ireland is presented as a backdrop on which cultural performances are played out. In “Duffy’s Circus,” Irishness and the Irish pastoral is performed more through the voice of the father and the careful place-naming (the circus has come to the Moy) than through the action of the poem itself, which is concerned with the literal cultural performances of Others—Indians and elephants and circus magicians. Sean O’Brien, in comparing concepts of home in Heaney and Muldoon, writes that “home is always already an elsewhere” for Muldoon (173). O’Brien is speaking to a certain transience of locality in Muldoon’s poems, but his concept applies to

⁴⁹ During that same 2008 interview, Muldoon mentioned having recently been back to Duffy’s Circus, which is still traveling up and down Ireland’s coast and shaking out its tents. When I asked him if he enjoyed the performance, Muldoon promptly replied that he “always found [him]self rooting for the elephants” to rampage.

Muldoon's presentation of the pastoral, as well—"here" exists only inasmuch as it exists with and against "there"—and for Muldoon, both ideas end up being presented parodically, either as Wild Bill's rain dance or a folksy-talking father figure spouting questionable words of wisdom.

And, too, one of the elements that unites these "naïve narrator" pastoral poems is their reliance on the boy child as narrator, offering a view of the world and a looming father figure that is in some ways unapologetically Freudian. Over each of these pastoral scenes (in "Duffy's Circus," but also "The Misfits," and, through the uncle as a stand in for the father, "Ned Skinner"), the specter of either literal fathers, cultural predecessors, or the hovering colonial presence of Great Britain (as in "The Turn"), the young narrator plays out a distinctly Freudian drama which finds him viewing various paternal figures through a lens both frightening and fanciful, even mocking at times. Muldoon's wry approach does not, however, extinguish the significance of the paternal in these poems—the father is everywhere in these pastoral scenes.⁵⁰

"Ned Skinner," 1977

Published alongside "Duffy's Circus," Ned Skinner offers another version of the pastoral—this one more traditional in scope. Ned Skinner, a traveling jack-of-all-trades, appears on the narrator's uncle's farm to butcher pigs one summer afternoon, and "'was a barbaric yawp' / if you took Aunt Sarah at her word" (*Poems 1968-1998* 47). The poem presents a typically rural scene, but again pushes back against the notion of the pastoral as an isolated retreat, this time through as simple a gesture as Aunt Sarah's Whitman reference in the first line of the poem. Skinner arrives as an outsider himself, stepping "over a mountain of a summer afternoon" to

⁵⁰ This, too, marks a perhaps bold distinction between Muldoon's pastoral and Heaney's. With the exception of a few father-dominated poems (like "Follower" and "Digging"), Heaney's pastoral is a distinctly feminine landscape, ripe with vaginal wells and bogs. Muldoon, on the other hand, evokes a pastoral that is thoroughly dominated, even overwhelmed, by the presence of one or another paterfamilias.

appear on the farm—an arrival that troubles both the young narrator and his Aunt Sarah, albeit for somewhat different reasons.

To lessen the trauma of the butchering of a “litter” of pigs, the narrator recalls that “Aunt Sarah would keep me in, / Taking me on her lap / Till it was over” (*Poems 1968-1998* 47). Her gesture seems protective to the point of prudishness, as slaughtering pigs, while certainly unpleasant, should not have been anything new for the child to witness.⁵¹ As the poem continues, however, we realize that it is not the impending death of baby pigs that Sarah wishes to shield the narrator from:

Ned Skinner came back
While my uncle was in the fields.
‘Sarah,’ he was calling, ‘Sarah.
You weren’t so shy in our young day.
You remember yon time in Archer’s loft?’
His face blazed at the scullery window.
‘Remember? When the hay was won.’

Aunt Sarah had the door on the snib.
‘That’s no kind of talk
To be coming over. Now go you home.’
Silence. Then a wheeze.
We heard the whiskey-jug
Tinkle, his boots diminish in the yard.
Aunt Sarah put on a fresh apron. (*Poems 1968-1998* 48)

Through the exchange between Ned and Sarah, Muldoon plays with the cultural tropes and expectations of both Irishmen and Irishwomen—using the pastoral setting and the expectations we have of that genre as a springboard for such maneuverings.

Through her performance here as a stereotypical Irish woman, Aunt Sarah both upholds and subverts traditional gender roles for Irish women; she is pure and chaste, protecting a child

⁵¹ Obvious parallels to Heaney’s “The Early Purges” arise; however, perhaps surprisingly, Heaney’s ode to the little deaths of farm life reads much more darkly than Muldoon’s.

from harsh truths.⁵² That chaste façade, however, is sabotaged by the “barbaric yawp” of Ned Skinner himself, who merrily reminds Sarah of an apparent sexual tryst between them some years ago. Sarah’s reaction to Ned’s reminder is particularly telling, as she chides Skinner for his unpleasant “kind of talk” and shoos him off the lawn before putting on a fresh apron, a symbolic and mostly ineffective attempt on Sarah’s part to return to her former state of cleanliness, before Ned interrupted (*Poems 1968-1998* 48). Sarah’s behavior highlights the performative nature of Irish womanhood—she reacts to Ned in all the appropriate ways that the traditional gender roles open to women dictate, but her role is unraveled by her tying on of the fresh apron—a symbolic and ultimately pointless act that highlights the similarly empty, even parodic gestures of Irish femininity. Once again, this performance takes place firmly in the realm of the pastoral, where a rural ritual of slaughtering pigs marks the occasion for Sarah and Ned to come into contact. With that pastoral scene as a platform, Muldoon plays with stereotypical notions of gender in Ireland, from the pure and unsullied Irish woman (a nod to the Virgin Mary) to the drunken Irishman who exposes Sarah’s sullied virtue, and the unreality of such prescribed roles—which in truth belong in Frawley’s museum case with the rest of her cultural artifacts, less about Ireland and the Irish than the idea of Ireland that has become part and parcel of the country’s mythos.

Ned himself also provides a site for hyperbolic citation of cultural norms, as he embodies that pervasive, distinctly Irish stereotype: the drunken, unrefined rascal. Ned represents yet another incarnation of the “Stage Irishman,” a stock character that has enjoyed a rich history in Irish theater. This low comic character is generally by his base needs, excessive drinking, and general buffoonery. Unsurprisingly, this “Stage Irishman” was not created by Irish writers;

⁵² Women’s roles in Ireland have been shaped by a multitude of sometimes conflicting forces, from the Catholic Church (which offers Mary as the ultimate example of female suffering) to Anglo representations of “wild Irish girls” (such as Lady Morgan’s 1806 novel, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*).

rather, the character was brought into invention by British playwrights. In an article exploring Dion Boucicault's appropriation of the trope for his own purposes, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford discusses the British motive for creating such a character to depict the Irish:

Although Ireland suffered dislocations of culture, language, and identity analogous to those experienced by colonized peoples in India and Africa, the Irish could not be distinguished from their imperial rulers by the color of their skin. They were "proximate" rather than "absolute" Others, a disturbing mix of sameness and difference, geographical closeness and cultural distance. English dramatists therefore indicated Irish inferiority and need for governance by emphasizing those character traits that signaled political incompetence. Stage Irishmen were not all identical, and some were positively depicted, but they belonged to a well-established theatrical genre that mocked non-English characters as different, dangerous, or ridiculous. (287)

Cullingford identifies British writers as the original genesis of the "Stage Irishman," but goes on to look at ways that Irish writers have since reclaimed the character, much as Muldoon does with his presentation of Ned Skinner.⁵³

Muldoon alludes to the "Stage Irishman" motif throughout "Ned Skinner," as Ned's drinking is referred to at least twice, through the "tinkle" of the whiskey-jug and the image of Ned's face "blazing" at the window, red from drink. Ned's speech, as well, is sprinkled with colloquialisms and folksy wisdom; he reassures the young narrator that

It doesn't hurt, not so's you'd notice,
And God never slams one door
But another's lying open.
Them same pigs can see the wind. (48)

Like the father in "Duffy's Circus," Ned's speech encompasses God and folk wisdom simultaneously. Through Ned's character, and his interaction with Aunt Sarah, Muldoon presents in "Ned Skinner" a pastoral tableau that both cites and subverts clichéd gender and cultural roles. Muldoon carefully builds a cozy scene—again, the culture under glass that

⁵³ In addition to refiguring the "Stage Irishman" trope, Cullingford suggests that Boucicault creates the reverse, a "Stage Englishman."

Frawley identifies—that includes all the players, the drunks, the virtuous Irish women, only to knock it all down, making clear the performative nature of such roles. Thus, the poem occupies the paradoxical space where Muldoon both recreates a pastoral—and perhaps nostalgic—scene of rural childhood while also manipulating the stereotypical tropes of rural Irish Catholic behavior (the drunken and hypersexual Ned, the chaste and chiding Aunt Sarah).

Mules is not the only collection in which Ned Skinner makes an appearance. He returns twenty-five years later in “The Turn,” published in 2002’s *Moy Sand and Gravel*. In “The Turn,” Muldoon more directly engages not simply the pastoral but also the colonial presence of Great Britain. Skinner’s role in this child-narrated sestina is brief but explicit, as the boy’s front lawn is described as “the yard through which Ned Skinner had moaned, ‘Saahaara, Saahaara’” (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 79). Ned’s moans refer obviously to Ned’s long-standing passion for the narrator’s Aunt Sarah, but also to the film *The Four Feathers*, which fuels the imaginative play of “The Turn’s” speaker.⁵⁴ In “The Turn,” the child narrator enacts a performance of an entirely different sort than what I have dubbed the cultural performances of Ned and Sarah in “Ned Skinner”; here, the young narrator acts out scenes from the film “The Four Feathers” in which he imagines himself to be the movie’s hero, Harry Feversham, a discharged British officer whose desire to “prove himself” to his fellow servicemen and his fiancée lead him on various imperial shenanigans through the Sahara. “The Turn,” like its forebear “Ned Skinner,” masquerades as a “simple” poem of rural youth while actually raising significant questions about uncomfortable issues of cultural identity and roles. Whereas the tension in “Ned Skinner” results from the cultured, gendered roles seen in Sarah and Ned, the tension in “The Turn” is raised through the

⁵⁴ Skinner’s calls for Sarah bring to mind another brutish stage character, as well—Tennessee Williams’ Stanley Kowalski, who so famously bellows for his wife, Stella, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

irony of the young, presumably Catholic Northern Irish narrator imagining himself to be a British military officer, certainly an unlikely object for the boy's hero-worship.⁵⁵

"The Misfits," 2002

In his book-length study of Muldoon, Jefferson Holdridge calls "The Misfits" "a nod to the pastoral"—an observation that he makes almost off-handedly but that is central to a full reading of the poem, one in which Muldoon offers yet another pastoral tableaux that raises questions about stereotypical ideas about Irish identity (in this case, the overpowering presence of the Catholic Church takes center stage). "The Misfits" begins with a young narrator digging potatoes near the Moy river, where "the sky over the Moy was the very same gray-blue / as the slow lift / of steam-smoke over the seam / of manure on a midwinter morning," and the narrator's hands were "blue with cold" as

Again and again I would bend
To my left and lift
By one handle a creel of potatoes—King Edwards, gray as lead—
Mined from what would surely seem

To any nine- or ten-year-old an inexhaustible seam (*Moy Sand and Gravel*
10)

The pastoral setting for "The Misfits" offers not the lush greenery that we might expect to be seen on a postcard of Ireland; instead, the scene is relentlessly colorless, a dark sky, gray-blue steam, hands blue with cold, potatoes gray as lead, as if the narrator is at pains to portray the scene as dully as possible.

Against this dull, almost lifeless setting, the life and energy in the poem centers on "the Monk," with whom the young narrator wishes to hitch a ride to travel into the Moy to see a

⁵⁵ This complication of the straight forward colonizer/colonized binary is repeated in much of Muldoon's work. Notable poems include "Year of the Sloes," "Meeting the British," and "The Lass of Aughrim." In each example, the speaker blurs the line between colonizer and colonized, victim and villain, often inhabiting both roles within the poem.

film—*The Misfits*, to be exact.⁵⁶ The narrator’s father steadfastly refuses to grant permission for the trip, noting, “Talk till you’re blue /in the face. I won’t let you take a lift /from the Monk. Blow all you like. I won’t bend” (10). The reasons behind his father’s refusal become clear when the narrator recalls the talk that has surrounded the Monk:

Fred Grew said something strange about how he liked to
“lift
His shirttail.” Jack Grimley chipped in with how we was “ostrich
Sized” because he once lent Joe Corr a book called *Little Boy Blue*.

When Fred Grew remarked on his having “no lead
In his pencil,” I heard myself say, cool as cool, “I think you’ve all been misled.”
(11)

The language of the neighbors, working class men like his father, is both colorful and damning, speaking to the homophobia fueled by a Catholic Church that, as Muldoon also makes clear in “The Misfits,” had a massive problem with child molestation. The narrator’s father also resorts to bird imagery to portray the Monk’s assumed homosexuality:

“That’s rich
All right. If you think, after that, I’d let the Monk give you a lift
Into the Moy to see Montgomery bloody Clift
You’ve another think coming. I’ll give him two barrels full of twelve-
gauge
Lead
If he comes anywhere near you. Bloody popinjay. Peacock. *Ostrich*.” (11)

Is the Monk a victim, both of a violent past and the cruel, casual homophobia of the men of the Moy—or a pedophilic priest trolling the Catholic Church for young boys who might idolize him, who might request a trip into town to see an American movie?⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *The Misfits*, released in 1961 and written by Arthur Miller, was the final film for two of its co-stars. Clark Gable died of a heart attack two days after filming ended, and it was also Marilyn Monroe’s last completed film. In many ways, the aura surrounding the film is mimicked in the poem, where a sense of foreboding hangs over the Moy and the young narrator.

⁵⁷ And of course, in the wake of the molestation scandals that have rocked the Church in recent years, there is little problem believing that a priest, or former-priest, might be believed to be sexually predatory. Bishops were also sometimes accused of dealing with molestation accusations by simply moving the priest in question to a new parish.

“The Misfits” utilizes the tools that I have come to see as essential to Muldoon’s version of the pastoral: a rural setting that offers Muldoon the chance to “play” with traditional Irish roles and cultural tropes; “stock Irish” characters (in this case, the father and his friends who dismiss the Monk as a homosexual and therefore worthy of ridicule and not to be trusted with children); a juxtaposition of what “is Irish,” with what “is not” (in this case, the significance of American film and music); and a rising tension that seeks to problematize and trouble a notion of cozy and quaint rural Irish identity. And, indeed, the poem ends on a plaintive note, as the narrator laments that

All I could think of was how the Monk was now no more likely to show
Me how to bend
That note on the guitar—“like opening a seam
Straight into your heart”—when he played Bessie Smith’s “Cold in Hand
Blues”

Than an ostrich to bend
Its lead-plumed wings and, with its two-toed foot, rip out the horizon seam
And lift off, somehow, into the blue. (12)

There is a subtle irony to the concluding lines of “The Misfits,” as the narrator, like his father, compares the Monk to an ostrich; unlike the father’s use of the term, however, in the narrator’s hands the image of the ostrich becomes indicative of freedom and escape from the oppressive culture and environment of the Moy. However beautiful the image of the great bird “ripping out the horizon seam,” though, the reality of the poem is that there is no escape, for either the Monk or the narrator. No one flies off into the blue, or even off into the town for the evening, as the narrator desired. Rather, no one leaves at all, and the poem ends as it began, under the “gray-blue” sky of the Moy.

“Tell,” 2002

Published 25 years after “Duffy’s Circus,” after Muldoon had spent a year as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, written seven volumes of poetry, taken a position teaching at Princeton, and set up residence in the United States, “Tell” is far removed from “Duffy’s Circus” in nearly every conceivable way—spatially, temporally, socially, culturally. And yet “Tell,” which tells the story of a child’s encounter with his father and the secrets and shibboleths of living in Northern Ireland, operates in much the same fashion as “Duffy’s Circus” did a quarter century earlier. Both poems present a version of rural Ireland (a pastoral, if you will allow me the liberty of applying the word generously) in which all is not what it seems, in which stereotypical cultural tropes play out in contrived scenarios.

“Tell” takes place when a young boy walks into a “peeling shed” where he discovers his father and “almost a score” of other workers peeling and coring apples (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 19). Until he walks into the shed, the boy has occupied a space ripe with imaginative play, as he brushes:

Past the stacks of straw
That stood in earlier for Crow
Or Comanche tepees hung with scalps
But tonight pass muster, row upon row,
For the foothills of the Alps. (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 19)

“Tell” portrays a world dominated by the presence of the child his “wide-eyed gaze,” as the child transforms the mundane objects that surround him into objects of great global, albeit macabre, adventures, from the Indian tepees of America to the Alps of Europe. In a fascinating doubling, these two particular images—Indians, Alps—are the exact same ones that appear in “Duffy’s Circus.” The Northern Ireland of Muldoon’s childhood, or at least of his child narrators, is an Ireland that is both strangely isolated and particular (as, perhaps, all islands must be) and

overwhelmingly global—the presence of not-Ireland is everywhere in these child speakers’ eyes, as the exotic comes to Ireland.⁵⁸ The presence of exoticized others (or their trappings—teepees, scalps) serves to highlight, by contrast, the fictive, performative nature of *all* cultures, illustrating how easily any culture can be reduced to a parody of itself—a tepee, a scalp, an IRA meeting.

From the site of the boy’s imaginative play we are transported, through his opening of the peeling shed door, into a distinctly adult world, one in which the threat of violence is not imaged but real:

He opens the door of the peeling shed
Just as one of the apple peelers—
One of almost a score
Of red-cheeked men who pare

And core
The red-cheeked apples for a few spare
Shillings—mutters something about “bloodshed”
And the “peelers.” (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 19)

The images Muldoon depicts in these stanzas are carefully wrought to carry maximum implications. The “peeling shed” becomes the site of potential bloodshed, literally a shed of blood, and the men inside the shed come to resemble the fruits they’ve been hired to peel, pare, and core: both the men and the apples are “red-cheeked” (19). The situation is not yet violent; however, the threat of violence, expressed only through the mutterings of one worker, is strong. In a small shed housing twenty men all armed with knives, any harbinger of violence is especially ominous.

⁵⁸ And, indeed, the use of the child narrator allows Muldoon a certain entrée into other cultures that he might not have otherwise. Although the child’s play is presumably innocent, there is something nonetheless jarring in the images of the teepees. At best, the taking of scalps by Native Americans is a troubled image, a site rife with questions of cultural appropriation and political sensitivity. At worst, the image of the scalp-taking, tepee-dwelling American Indian is a flimsy stereotype. By creating these images in the imagination of a child, Muldoon neatly sidesteps any question of cultural tactlessness.

The pastoral is only seemingly calm and tranquil here; the political reality is a tinderbox. Muldoon explores this idea often, juxtaposing what might seem quaint and even romantic about a rural Irish scene with an impending threat of political violence that renders every scene potentially deadly. Perhaps the most succinct example of this idea is his poem “Ireland,” which encapsulates the fickle and violent nature of the Northern Irish countryside in five terrible lines:

The Volkswagen parked in the gap,
But gently ticking over.
You wonder if it's lovers
And not men hurrying back
Across two fields and a river. (*Collected Poems 1968-1998* 82-83)

In the Ireland of “Ireland,” a scene that might be two lovers parking in a (small, VW) backseat for a passionate interlude on a country road might just as well be a car bomb, “ticking” toward a destruction set into motion by men who are identified as neither Loyalist or IRA. It does not, it seems, matter much one way or the other. Rather, the significance is simply in their existence as they hurry across the “two fields and river” that might have made a cozy pastoral scene if not for cruel political reality. “Tell,” written decades after “Ireland,” relies on the same juxtaposition of the political and the pastoral. Romantic notions of the pastoral, either literal, like lovers, or figurative, as in a romantic notion of the pastoral encapsulated in an apple orchard, is brought up only to be closed off by the looming threat of violence in a space where quaint idylls only exist alongside violent realities—and such romantic notions are rendered performative, tenuous, nearly staged, in the face of political unrest and civil war.

Contributing to the ominous environment of “Tell” is its Northern Irish subtext, stemming from the meaning of the word “peeler,” which, in addition to referencing the work the men are doing in the shed, is also a slang term for a police officer. This term, combined with the title, “Tell,” results in undercurrents for the poem that are particularly significant in the context

of Northern Ireland's Civil War, where the policy of "informing" (giving information to the authorities, that is, *telling*) carried heavily negative implications. The boy walks into the peeling shed expecting nothing amiss, but he finds himself confronted with the threat of potential violence. The title and the inclusion of the word peeler enact a subtext which implies the predicament the boy faces: how should one react to witnessing a violent or potentially violent act? In the context of the Troubles, the proper response might be simply to ignore it, as Heaney infamously advocated in his Troubles-era poem, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing."

Finally, the threat of violence comes to fruition in the poem's final stanzas, as the men put down their knives, apparently taken aback at the boy's unexpected intrusion. The only worker in the peeling shed who retains his weapon is the boy's father, and the scene recreates the famous myth of William Tell:

The red-cheeked men put down their knives
At one and the same
Moment. All but his father, who somehow connives
To close one eye as if taking aim

Or holding back a tear,
And shoots him a glance
He might take, as it whizzes past his ear,
For another Crow, or Comanche, lance (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 20)

Here Muldoon pulls in yet another cultural myth. The potshot at William Tell is in keeping with Muldoon's parodic play he engages with in his pastoral scenes, where the cozy and familiar is re-staged in purposeful, troubling ways. Muldoon rewrites the myth of William Tell so that it is no longer the heroic (if slightly terrifying) story of extreme and total trust between a father and a son, in which the father uses a bow and arrow to shoot an apple balanced upon his son's head. Rather, this father fires an emotional arrow at his son, shooting not a spear but a (g)lance. The implications of this shot, however, are as clear as any physical arrow could be: the son has

intruded upon a world that he does not fully understand—and the realities of the peeling shed are much more potentially dangerous than the scalps and tepees of the boy’s imagination—and the realities of life in Northern Ireland render idyllic pastoral scenes always already undermined.

In “Tell,” the rural idyll of Northern Ireland is never idyllic at all; instead, Muldoon presents a scene of rural labor in which the men are reduced to the harvest they are and the aura of impending violence hangs heavy over everything. Here, Muldoon illustrates the importance of performance—of show, of acting a certain way—to life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. If, in the earlier poems in this section, the notion of performance has been in play to catechize and rewrite certain tropes of Irish identity, to set the stereotypical elements of Irish culture against similarly reductive notions of other exoticized fare, in “Tell” the performance becomes more real, less tongue-in-cheek; here, Muldoon’s typical delivery is laced with something uncharacteristically earnest, and the performances feels different, like a reminder that the Troubles rendered many “performances” a matter of deadly earnest.

“He Knew the Cure for Farcy”: Father Figures and Folk Knowledge

Father figures have played a powerful, at times nearly overbearing role in the pastoral poems I’ve selected for this chapter, and the father occupies a significant enough role in Muldoon’s conception of the pastoral to warrant further exploration and singular treatment; in fact, the father figure is the most commonly used of the “stock Irish” characters I’ve been at pains to point out in this chapter, and often appears as almost a shorthand for Irish identity to stand against whatever not-Ireland other is being presented (be it circus, unfamiliar priest, or a boy’s Americanized imagination). In addition, the father figure in Muldoon’s pastoral poems often represents a past to which Muldoon himself cannot return—the knowledge and skills his

father possessed are not known to Muldoon, as the Ireland that has been rendered beneath Oona Frawley's "culture under glass" is not truly accessible, either.

Through the use of colloquial language and folk wisdom, the father figure comes to stand in for a certain notion of Irish identity, as we can see in a poem like "Duffy's Circus," where the father imparts folksy, anecdotal knowledge to his son, commenting that "God must have left Ireland / and gone up a tree" when the circus comes to the Moy (66). His speech is similarly colorful in "Cuba" (1972), as the father pounds the breakfast-table and declares:

Those Yankees were touch and go as it was—
If you'd heard Patton in Armagh—
But this Kennedy's nearly an Irishman
So he's not much better than ourselves.
And him with only to say the word.
If you've got anything on your mind
Maybe you should make your peace with God. (79)

The father's speech here is colloquial, peppered with witty phrases that are usually directly related to Irish identity. In fact, the father speaks directly of Ireland in both examples, railing against the sully of Ireland by the mere presence of the circus in the first example and suggesting a certain innate knowledge of President Kennedy's Irish temperament in the second.

Muldoon himself has assured interviewers that the father as a character is just that—a character rather than a biographical person. When questioned about the presence and prevalence of certain characters in his poetry during a 1999, Muldoon comments:

As it occurs in the poems, my family is from the earliest invented, invented brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers. The father who appears with, for some people, distressing regularity in these poems is a fictitious character or characters. Sometimes he's illiterate and sometimes he's extremely literate, allusive, and speaks in a way that the real "father" would never have done. I often use that as a little shorthand, just to establish a notion of the world with everything more or less in order to which something slightly extraordinary happens. (*Writing Irish* 94)

By Muldoon's own admission, the father figure often operates as a kind of stock character, representing both more and less than a "real" or biographical father. Instead, the father figure comes to represent a colloquial, sometimes even uncharitable view of Irishness. He is not the drunken lout embodied by Ned Skinner, but rather someone lacking certain social graces and the polish of formal education. In the various incarnations of the father we often see not a fully fleshed character but a flat, symbolic one, representative of one portrayal of Irish identity. Just as Ned Skinner represents one stock character, the "Stage Irishman," the father figure that recurs throughout Muldoon's pastorals operates in a similar way. The overblown stereotype of the father is always ultimately proven to be less than effective: his warnings go unheeded in "Duffy's Circus" and "Cuba," while we view his passionate dismissal of the Monk as cruel and small-minded in "The Misfits." However much the father may be the subject of parody, though, his presence, sometimes overpowering throughout Muldoon's career, is undeniable. The pastoral performances Muldoon stages offer moments to make light of the father, to take the piss, as it were, but they never actually unseat him from his role at the head of the proverbial table, either. If Muldoon's pastorals offer him spaces to act out his anxieties about the influence of his father, they do not present opportunities to banish the father altogether.

The father figure also appears in poems such as "The Mixed Marriage," in which he stands in contrast to his wife, a school-teacher from "the world of Castor and Pollux" who has "read one volume of Proust" (60). The father's knowledge is less scholarly, perhaps more useful: he knows the cure for farcy, despite that he "left school at eight or nine" and "took up billhook and loy / to win the ground he would never own" (60). His lack of formal education is also alluded to in "The Fox," when the father is imagined "painstakingly writing [his] name / with a carpenter's pencil" (166). Father figures haunt Muldoon's rural landscapes; however, the

father figure does not always appear in such hyperbolic citations of bumbling rural Irishness—on the contrary, at times he is presented as utterly capable and apt. For instance, in “The Coney” (published in 1987’s *Meeting the British*), the narrator can make only fumbling approximations of his father’s agricultural skills. He confesses:

Although I have never learned to mow
I suddenly found myself half-way through
Last year’s pea-sticks
In our half-acre of garden. (152)

The narrator is not only unfamiliar with the daily business of farming, but also inept at the work he does in his father’s place.

In “The Coney,” the pastoral marks a space of extreme and obvious anxiety, as Muldoon, whose life as a scholar and a poet have led him far from his rural roots, is patently unable to manage what would have been a simple task for his father:

This past winter he had been too ill
To work. The scythe would dull
So much more quickly in my hands
Than his, and was so often honed
That while the blade
Grew less and less a blade
The whetstone had entirely disappeared. (152)

The narrator finds he is nearly incapable of wielding his father’s tools; instead, the poem’s action turns from a recounting of his not entirely successful attempts to fill his father’s shoes to something else entirely, as the tools become the site of a bizarre conversion. The father’s tools, in the hands of his poet son, work in strange new ways: the father’s whetstone, which he kept “safely wrapped / in his old tweed cap” transforms without warning into “a lop-eared cony [that] was now curled inside the cap” (152). Muldoon’s magically transformative pastoral scene is here reminiscent of Heaney’s “Digging,” where his father’s spade becomes the pen that Heaney will dig with. In Muldoon’s wryly performative and spectacular fashion, however, the

transformation is nowhere near as lucid and logical as Heaney's spade-turned-pen. For Muldoon, poetry is less about yielding a harvest than it is about offering a trick; he literally conjures a rabbit from a hat. Employing such theatrics in "The Coney" links it absolutely to the pastoral tableaux he creates in "Duffy's Circus," where a man sees a woman in half behind the big top. "The Coney" plays out on the rural and pastoral stage of Muldoon's spectacular performances, speaking both to an anxiety over fatherly influence and a reticence to speak seriously, or at least straightforwardly, of either poetics, politics, or his own Bloomian anxiety of influence. The crux of the poem is clear, however; Muldoon (like Heaney before him) cannot carve a living from the ground as his father before him was able to do. Just as Colin Graham in *Deconstructing Ireland* wrote about the impossibility of identifying an "authentic" Ireland, arguing that instead some measure of authenticity might be found on the surface of things rather than in some "hidden" and rural Ireland, Muldoon finds no sense of identity or self in working the ground his father once plowed and hoed. Rather, Muldoon uses that landscape as a site for a spectacular poetic transformation, wherein a whetstone is rendered into a coney, a rabbit Muldoon can pull from his father's hat. "The Coney," perhaps more than any other of Muldoon's pastoral poems, highlights the importance of the rural as a backdrop from which the poet—and poem—can proceed.

The revolution of the whetstone into the coney transforms the poem itself, which shifts into an elegy for the father whose abilities the narrator cannot match. The rabbit makes its way onto a diving board (attached to a pool which has appeared, along with the rabbit itself), chattering about types of cauliflower to the narrator before it jumps into the pool. As the rabbit hits the water, the narrator engages in the grief that the poem has heretofore avoided:

The moment he hit the water
He lost his tattered

Bathing togs
To the swimming pool's pack of dogs.
'Come in': this flayed
Coney would parade
And pirouette like honey on a spoon:
'Come on in, Paddy Muldoon.'

And although I have never learned to swim
I would willingly have followed him. (153)

The narrator's grief and longing for his father in "The Coney" overwhelm any urge on the part of the poet to ventriloquize or perform; rather than any hyperbolic representation of stereotypical Irish identity or fount of folk wisdom, the father figure here is invoked and mourned, even celebrated, as the son pays homage to his father's knowledge and abilities that he lacks. And, as it seriously, even beautifully elegizes a dead father, "The Coney" pokes fun (and misery) at a lost pastoral past. The second half of the twentieth century (and the rapidly changing, often violent landscape of Northern Ireland during the Troubles), has rendered sons who do not resemble their fathers. Muldoon's father's knowledge escapes him; he is a farmer's son who cannot mow a half-acre of garden. His father's whetstone is not a tool for Muldoon, but rather a site for him to enact the oldest trick in the magician's book—tugging a rabbit from a hat.

Even a fairly superficial perusal of the various pastoral poems centering on a father figure throughout Muldoon's career demonstrates a pattern of stylized, parodic performativity when we view the father figure through the eyes of a childlike, naïve narrator. When the father figure interacts with his son as a child, he is almost invariably the site of a culturally loaded performance, as with sexualized exoticism of "Duffy's Circus," the implications for the Catholic Church in "The Misfits," the looming threat of IRA violence in "Tell," or the dismissal of JFK as "an Irishman not much better than ourselves" in "Cuba." At these moments the father nearly always speaks in a colloquial dialect, makes reference to Ireland or Irish identity, and is often

associated with the Catholic Church. When the father appears at other biographical “times,” however, when the narrator is not a child but an adult, no such hyperbolic performance is necessary. Poems like “The Coney” and “The Waking Father” are only two such examples; the father figure also appears in multiple elegies, including “The Mirror” and “Cherish the Ladies,” both published in *Quoof* (1983). The father figure also appears as a child himself in “Third Epistle to Timothy” (Hay, 1998), set in 1923 and focusing on the father’s experiences working as a “servant boy” to a neighboring Protestant family at the age of eleven (451). All of these poems include the father figure without reliance on a hyperbolic performance in which the father figure exhibits colloquial speech patterns and folk wisdom. However, Muldoon relies on the dual performances of the child speaker and the culturally archetypal father in nearly every poem in which the father appears in good health and as an adult (thus excluding both the elegies and “Third Epistle to Timothy”). Muldoon’s use of the child speaker in these pastoral poems allows him to create a father figure that is ultimately “more” than any real father could be, characterized by a highly stylized performance of rural Irish identity and culture.

Muldoon’s use of cultural parody, ventriloquism, and performance works to denaturalize fixed notions of Irish identity and cultural norms— notions that have been increasingly in flux, both reiterated and destabilized by the Troubles of the latter half of the twentieth century and the increasingly globalized Ireland of the twenty-first.⁵⁹ Muldoon’s use of cultural parody to navigate the shifting terrain of what constitutes Irish identity is an idea that has been the subject of critical attention before. In identifying and contrasting the presence of cultural identity in Heaney and Muldoon, Ingo Berensmeyer suggests that both poets, in different ways, occupy a space of hybridization, translation, and pluralization, rather than any fixed identity. For Muldoon, Berensmeyer writes, “Ireland is a place of perpetual transition,” and “the space that the

⁵⁹ Not to mention, of course, the so-called Celtic Tiger economy of the Irish Republic.

poet inhabits is a space of cultural translatability, of sudden connections and separations...It exemplifies a space of cultural hybridization that replaces more established notions of cultural identity” (76). In particular, Berensmeyer points to Muldoon’s use of voice as one way in which the poet achieves this hybridity:

The arbitrariness and imprecision of language as well as the fictionality of memory processes that is a thematic concern in many...Muldoon poems produce a decentering of subjectivity as a representative speaker position by switching from identity to difference, from consciousness to communication. (73)

Berensmeyer identifies in Muldoon’s work a fluidity, a lack of fixed identities, that is, I have argued, particularly present in his use of cultural parody in creating pastoral scenes. Through hyperbolic cultural citation, exemplified in characters like Ned Skinner and, perhaps most frequently, the many ubiquitous father figures that haunt the rural terrain that Muldoon’s poems occupy, Muldoon creates moments of cultural resignification and subversion that culminate in a version of the pastoral that at once celebrates and mocks the very rooted Irish identity that yielded them in the first place. Through stylized repetitions of cultural norms, Muldoon exposes not only the untruth of such norms, but also the cultural⁶⁰ underpinnings that must exist to prop up such norms.

The child narrators, colloquial characters, larger-than-life father figures, and exoticized others that appear continuously in Muldoon’s pastoral poems allow the poet himself to simultaneously engage and evade difficult subject matter, be it political, cultural, or even personal in nature. Through these performances Muldoon creates and recreates both himself and his speakers with fluidity and ease, like the poet Amergin that Muldoon himself praises in *To Ireland, I*. Given Muldoon’s penchant for transformative identity and fluidity, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that another key element of pastoral scenery in Muldoon’s overture is that of

⁶⁰ Or perhaps imperial, in the case of Oona Frawley’s notion of a museum culture that has so informed this chapter.

water—rivers, streams, lakes, the looming presence of the Atlantic. In Chapter Four, I will look to these watery landscapes as moments that allow Muldoon to move in and out of Ireland, while staying linked to a pastoral tradition that is, in definable ways, Irish.

CHAPTER 4.
A WIND BRED ON THE ATLANTIC:
BODIES OF WATER AND DISPLACEMENT IN PAUL MULDOON

Sean O'Brien has written of Muldoon's work that "home is already an elsewhere"—when he compares Heaney and Muldoon, he finds that although Heaney is rooted firmly in Irish soil, Muldoon does not remain tethered, even to the Ireland that appears in so much of his work. To O'Brien's charge—that Muldoon is not rooted to landscape, that this very lack of grounding marks a fundamental difference between Muldoon and Heaney—I offer: yes, but. For Muldoon, Ireland exists in juxtaposition with everywhere else—to be Irish, to be in Ireland, is necessarily also to be butting up against not-Ireland.⁶¹ In the previous chapter, I was at pains to show how much of Muldoon's child narrator's depictions of rural and pastoral Ireland relied on the presence—and performances—of exoticized others: circus freaks, Wild Bill's performers, movie stars like Montgomery Clift, the soulful bending of one perfect note of Bessie Smith's "Cold Hand Blues." If one way that Muldoon has defined Ireland and identified rural Irishness has been through the presence of what is not Irish, another almost equally prevalent pattern in Muldoon's work has been his use of bodies of water to connect rural and pastoral Irish culture and identity to the "elsewhere" that O'Brien claims as Muldoon's home.

For Muldoon, water functions as a metaphor for a mobile Irish identity—that is, as a vehicle that, through its very fluidity, is able to move from the pastoral to the cosmopolitan and back again. Bodies of water allow Muldoon to move through time and space (in early poems like "Dancers at the Moy" and "The Waking Father"), and then to move in and out of Ireland altogether (in poems like "The Lass of Aughrim," "Meeting the British," and "At the Sign of the Black Horse, 1999"). In reading these and selected other "water poems" in this chapter, I wish to

⁶¹ And, of course, this is not confined to Irish writers or Irish experiences; we might identify similar experiences in different postcolonial and/or diasporic writers from around the globe.

make clear the function that these poems play in Muldoon's conception of the rural and pastoral landscape: namely, that water has been one way that Muldoon has been able to use the pastoral as a springboard for the cosmopolitan and as a mode of transport out of Ireland and back again, as a way to connect the particular environment of Ireland with a global postcolonial landscape. Ironically, the very fluidity of rivers, their changeability, acts as a touchstone, offering a firm ground from which to construct an Irish identity in a world that is increasingly fluid and mobile. The environment itself offers such a touchstone, an alternative to a decentered postcolonial, postmodern, post-diasporic existence.

To make such a claim—that Muldoon uses water in his pastoral writing to act as a touchstone and present an alternative to a decentered postcolonial and postmodern existence—clearly begs the question: is such a touchstone necessary? Do we, or should Muldoon, require an alternative to a decentered existence? I suspect that there are some people who would argue vociferously that no, we do not need and should not require an alternative, and in fact in doing so we are taking a step backward, relying on old constructs of identity that are rooted in tangible and fallible notions of what is “real.” And, to some extent, I agree—perhaps we do not *need* or *require* tangible touchstones with which to tether identity. However, I wish to show, through Muldoon's use of water in his pastoral poems, what might happen if we should *choose*, not out of necessity or requirement but simply out of desire, to use nature as a touchstone for identity. And, as I am at pains to show in this chapter, I wish to think about how potentially groundbreaking nature can become when considering constructs of identity, particularly when nature can be presented as something fluid, changeable, yielding, powerful, and feminine.

**The Torah, Murder Inc, and Irish Navvies: The Diasporic Flood of
“The Sign of the Black Horse, 1999”**

The final poem in 2002’s *Moy Sand and Gravel*, “The Sign of the Black Horse, 1999,” is much like the last poem in many of Muldoon’s collections: it is significantly longer and more complex than the rest of the poems that come before it, and it has the feeling of a conclusion, a crescendo, perhaps even a coda. In short, because of its placement in the collection in that position of honor, “The Sign of the Black Horse 1999”⁶² bears a certain significance. Reviewer Maria Johnston describes “Black Horse” as an “expansive formal tapestry [weaving together] the poet’s dominant preoccupations with the dualities of language, history and familial history, the present and past, real and imagined” (“Tracing the Roots of Metastasis”). Johnston’s summation offers a useful point of departure for this discussion of the poem, as I am most interested in the incredible variety of things (like history, family, time, the “real and the only “imagined”)(that are all present in “Black Horse,” and all mixed up. The notion of complicated cultural and personal diasporic identities is nothing new; in 1994 Homi Bhabha wrote that “double-lives are led in the postcolonial world” (306). For Muldoon here, however, identities are not just double but writ in triplicate, quadrupled, stacked one upon another as he writes of a literal flood of ancestors and history. In this way, Muldoon’s flood of identities and locales links “Black Horse” more clearly with notions of cosmopolitanism than a “simple” diaspora narrative, as we might see in the flood waters the kind of “global citizens” cosmopolitanism espouses. However, Muldoon’s notion of cosmopolitanism here is less grim than some. For instance, Paul Gilroy has advocated for a “degree of estrangement” from the familiar in order to achieve global citizenship (67). In “Black Horse,” however, Muldoon is far from estranged from his antecedents—indeed, the past and the familiar is everywhere.

⁶² From this point on, “The Sign of the Black Horse 1999” will be referred to as “Black Horse.”

Perhaps even more interesting that Muldoon's use of water as a marker for fluidity and cleansing—a practice with long, even biblical roots—is how water in a pastoral landscape offers a powerful feminine mode of reading and experiencing nature and the environment. Water has long been associated with femininity and birth—it is literally amniotic fluid. In this way, Muldoon's reliance on water imagery in his landscapes links his presentation of the pastoral to Heaney's abject pastoral vision. Both poets, I have been at pains to argue here, present a landscape that is powerful not in spite of being feminine or feminized (as in a colonizer/colonized dichotomy), but because of the feminine characteristics the land possesses: for Heaney, the abject, and for Muldoon, the fluid.

The flood that drives the action in "Black Horse," a catastrophic waterway that elides any human interference or attempt control, marks "Black Horse" as one of Muldoon's pastoral poems not because of most of its subject matter (which is decidedly not traditionally pastoral in scope), but because of the vehicle for that subject matter—a natural event that reminds us that landscape and environment cannot be ignored in any discussion of culture and history. This idea of the centrality of nature has been a staple of postcolonial ecocriticism, and reading "Black Horse" through this lens offers a poignant reminder of that lesson—and allows us to take Muldoon's notion of the pastoral on the road, as it were, moving across the Atlantic.

The poem finds Muldoon and his family viewing the devastation of Hurricane Floyd from their driveway, watching as the hurricane's floodwaters rush past on Canal Road, which has become literally a swollen canal.⁶³ Numerous objects and figures appear in the rushing water, creating a tumultuous mix of the past and the present. In Hurricane Floyd's powerful aftermath we see the jumbled layers that make up a transnational, diasporic family tree in which the

⁶³ It would, I think, be remiss not to point out his this canal, pouring out and over with lives and history and cultural touchstones on a rush of water, resembles nothing so much as a birth canal, however, obvious such a connection might be.

pastoral/rural/natural becomes littered with the detritus of the twenty-first century. In Jefferson Holdridge's words, the "hurricane represents the coming of Europeans to America . . . it is the sublime force which Muldoon both parodies and acknowledges" (169). This uneasy tension between parodic send-up and earnest acknowledgement is Muldoon's sweet spot, and nowhere is that tension more present than in Hurricane Floyd's roiling waters. Prominent in the flood are the ancestors of Muldoon's Jewish wife, including a child wearing a "peaked cap" in the Poland of the 1930s, on whom will soon be pinned a "star of yellow felt"; an "Uncle Arnie" Rothstein, who is described as "the brain behind the running, during Prohibition, of grain alcohol into the States" and the briber behind the 1919 Black Sox Scandal⁶⁴; and a "great-grandfather, Sam Korelitz," who demands to know why Muldoon's son, Asher, was denied a bris as he floats past (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 86-89).⁶⁵

Muldoon's own ancestors, or at least his cultural predecessors, make an appearance as well, when Muldoon imagines the "groundbreaking Irish navies" who might have contributed to the infrastructure of his New England home.⁶⁶ The significance of this jumble of ancestors is questionable, however; floating alongside the spectral figures of the past are a variety of signs that have been loosened by the flood: cryptic public notices like Please Examine Your Change, No Turn on Red, and Please Secure Your Oxygen Mask drift along in the current. In a global, post-diaspora world, the flood becomes an apt metaphor for identity, as everything—the

⁶⁴ And now, of course, the posthumous character in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*.

⁶⁵ It is worth noting that, despite not having a bris, Muldoon's son bears a name with long-standing Jewish roots. Asher, according to the Torah the son of Jacob, was also the founder of the Tribe of Asher, and the name Asher translates to blessing (or happiness) in Hebrew.

⁶⁶ "Navy" referred to any manual laborer who worked on the railroad, in either England or the United States; in particular, it was a common profession for immigrants. In the United States, Chinese and Irish immigrants made up the bulk of the railway workers. David Brooks, in his study of the navvies of the nineteenth century, has commented particularly on the role of the "ubiquitous Irish" on railways in both Britain and the United States. Regardless of nationality, life as a navvy was often squalid and always poorly compensated.

significant and the banal alike—is made to move continuously through the world. Arjun Appadurai writes of the tangled meetings of people and images in the transnational diasporic community in *Modernity at Large*, noting, “both persons and images often meet unpredictably, outside the certainties of home” (4). Muldoon’s version of Hurricane Floyd envisions just such a space, a vista in which the only certainty becomes the uncertainty of nature and the devastating power of the hurricane itself.

Speaking to a modernity similar to Appadurai, Christopher Malone writes that “contemporary Northern Irish poets respond to a culture understood increasingly as post-nationalist, post-unionist, and post-colonial. Irish identity is figured more and more in relation to a postmodern community” (1083). The fragmented, jumbled contents of the canal coursing past Muldoon’s New Jersey front yard epitomize that postmodern community—a space where even the domestic arena of the front yard is inundated with the flood’s relentless rush of culture and history—a miasma that can seem incomprehensible but unavoidable. And, indeed, Muldoon confronts the illegibility of the cultural stew the hurricane has generated; as he and his wife “gawk” at Floyd’s wrath, their newborn son, Asher, “sleep[s] on, as likely as any of us to find a way across / the millrace on which logs (trees more than logs) are borne alone” (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 84). Asher remains blissfully unaware of the turmoil of past and present his father confronts in the roiling waters, sleeping through the floating reminders of the Holocaust and of a painful immigrant experience, only opening his eyes at the end of the poem. Muldoon, meanwhile, faces the horrors of his and his wife’s (and therefore Asher’s) cultural past—and the difficulty in comprehending it. Muldoon is, at this moment, a long way, both spatially and metaphorically, from the rural Irish spaces he inhabited in the poems I included in the previous chapter; in fact, it is only through the powerful and sometimes destructive presence of nature that

these two worlds and two identities (the rural Northern Irish child digging potatoes or attending the circus, the Princeton professor in his front yard) can meet. It is through the natural, the environmental, that Muldoon confronts the “postmodern community” of which he is a part—and on the wings of the pastoral that the cosmopolitan takes flight.

It is also worth noting that Muldoon holds his infant son here. If the flood is an opportunity for Muldoon the Transnational Adult to connect to the pastoral world that Muldoon the Northern Irish Child left behind, literally and figuratively, how significant is it that Muldoon now holds his own son in his arms? In “Black Horse,” Asher is blissfully unaware of the storm that rages around him. However, as he opens his eyes at the poem’s conclusion, we are left to wonder, are his opened eyes an awakening to the complicated world to which his diasporic family tree has left him heir? Will the flood waters someday be his to confront? Does “Black Horse” mark the moment where Muldoon’s concerns quit being those of a son for his father and are instead those of a father for his son? Although the father/son dynamics and tension that have animated much of Muldoon’s writing throughout his career are not the central focus of this project, I believe the argument could be made that Muldoon uses Hurricane Floyd’s flood waters as a moment of rebirth, shifting himself from the role of son to the role of father.

In the early stanzas of “Black Horse,” the characters that surface from the past are amusing, larger-than-life figures. Most memorable is Arnold Rothstein, the World-Series-fixing, Bugsy-Siegel-esque gangster who drives past in a floating Studebaker filled with illegal Prohibition Era moonshine. Uncle Arnie is described as “just one step ahead of the police launch,” and we root for him as he motors down the watery highway, a nod to the romantic notion of organized crime spawned of immigration in the early twentieth century (86). Other aspects of the past are not as amusing or anecdotal, however. The troubling yellow-starred

Polish boy from the 1930s appears multiple times, an image rendered particularly disturbing by its juxtaposition with what should be an “all-American” activity—Muldoon turning the day into a family picnic by lighting a grill. The moment is weird and eerie, however: the poet is “determined” to “make the most of the power cut / Here on Ararat,” a self-satisfied, almost smug assertion of the family’s safety. Like Noah and his ark, Muldoon’s front yard has proven to be their own private Ararat, sheltering them from the hurricane’s potentially deadly flood waters. The nod to Noah is loaded at best; Muldoon acknowledges the furious power of uncontrollable flood waters, but ultimately positions himself and his family in the footsteps of the protected patriarch Noah, who manages to escape roiling flood waters for having toed God’s holy line. It is, perhaps, a sendup of Muldoon’s own privilege, even in the face of what would seemingly be the ultimate equalizer—a natural disaster. There is, however, a lurking undercurrent of menace to the jovial scene, as the family goes on to:

Tear another leaf from Edward Bulwer—Lytton’s
King Poppy to light the barbecue shortly to be laden
With Dorothy’s favorite medallions of young rat

And white-lipped peccary taken this morning not with old-fashioned piano
wire
But the latest in traps. (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 85)

An oddly horrible scene, there is something amusing about Muldoon lighting his barbecue with *King Poppy*, a collection of poetry from Edward Bulwer-Lytton, that Victorian writer most famous for the opening line of novel, *Paul Clifford* (“It was a dark and stormy night . . .”). It is a humor tinged with dread, however—the combined references of piano wire and burning, coming on the heels of the little Polish boy’s appearance, conjure up the grislier aspects of World War Two, as Muldoon’s family picnic becomes eerily reminiscent of an Auschwitz crematorium. This is to say nothing of the inexplicable horror of the roasted peccary, supposedly Muldoon’s

daughter Dorothy's favorite. The carnal, consumptive nature of the barbecue satirizes the entire scene, in fact—how privileged must one be to enjoy a natural disaster by lighting a grill in the front yard? At any rate, the Auschwitz allusion recurs later, when one of the signs floating by in Floyd's wake is *Arbeit Macht Frei*, and the smoke of the barbecue is recast as "that smoke [that] would flail and fling itself over Auschwitz" (96). The weight of the past is continual present in "Black Horse," a presence that swims out of the depths of the flood to confront the poet and his family with frightening closeness—one that renders moot the idea that America would or could offer a fresh start to immigrants, or a break with the past. Instead, the weight of history all comes out in the wash.⁶⁷ That the water is the conduit for these remnants of the past only reiterates the points made in previous chapters about the primacy of the environment to cultural history and memory.

The Jewish ancestors of Muldoon's wife become linguistically connected with Muldoon's own predecessors, as well; the Irish make several appearances in "Black Horse," as the poem is interspersed with "Irish schlemiels"—"schlemiel" being the Yiddish word for dolt. These Irish schlemiels, like the other characterizations of Irishness that I discussed in Chapter Three, are presented as stereotypically shiftless and ineffectual, described as "likely as not to / Mosk / his brogans for a ladle of rum" (102). Another "starving" Irish schlemiel appears at the end of the poem, described as "one of those thousands of Irish schmucks who still loll / still loll and lollygag / between the preposterous towpath and the preposterous berm" (104-105). The Irish here appear to be the ghosts of earlier canal diggers, their specters still "lolling" in the canal, waiting to be washed up by the flood. Like the Stage Irish presentation of Ned Skinner, Muldoon plays up the caricature of the Irish immigrant here, lazy and drunken. Perhaps of more

⁶⁷ This idea about the inability to ever eradicate fully the presence of the past recurs again in other poems discussed here; see in particular "Moy Sand and Gravel," the last poem mentioned in this chapter.

interest than Muldoon's mocking of the Irish stereotype, however, is the way that the Irish immigrants who did so much of the work to create an American infrastructure (canals, railways) continue to haunt the American landscape. When Christopher Malone writes that Muldoon's "home is already an elsewhere," perhaps what we should read is that for Ireland, like many other nations, home is already an elsewhere.⁶⁸ In "Black Horse," the catastrophic waters of Hurricane Floyd dredge up the ghosts of the Irish immigrant workers, reminding both Muldoon and the audience that the Irish presence in America is a literal mark on the American landscape in the form of railways, canals, and other infrastructure built by immigrant hands.⁶⁹

"Black Horse," and the flood it describes, offers a representation of history that is inherently unstable, inherently fluid and mixed—a history that is driven by culture but foregrounded in the environment—in the movement of water due to a natural disaster, in the scarring and transformation of landscape due to the markings of infrastructure and empire, in the presence at the environmental level of the weight of history. In "Identity or Hybridization? Mapping Irish Culture in Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon," Ingo Berensmeyer suggests that both poets occupy a space of hybridization, translation, and pluralization, rather than any fixed identity. Of Muldoon in particular he comments, "the space that the poet inhabits is a space of cultural translatability, of sudden connections and separations . . . It exemplifies a space of cultural hybridization that replaces more established notions of cultural identity" (76).

⁶⁸ Historically, Ireland is a nation of emigrants who have "made their home elsewhere"—during the Famine, approximately one million people died, and approximately another million left Ireland. These numbers are rough, but seem to be the general consensus of historians—meaning that after the Famine, one in four Irish people were either dead or living elsewhere. For a recent (and feisty, unapologetically pro-Irish) account of events, Tim Pat Coogan's 2012 book *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy* offers a smart recounting of events and an interesting analysis of the lingering effects of Ireland's "Great Hunger," which he terms "famine mentality."

⁶⁹ The building of infrastructure by largely immigrant hands is not a new idea, or a uniquely American one. Irish navies also dug canals and lay railroad track in England, and the British empire recruited 32,000 Indian laborers to Africa to build the "Lunatic Express" across 660 miles of what is now Kenya.

Berensmeyer argues that the idea of an established cultural identity has been replaced by a more fluid concept of cultural hybridity, which is a point that has been raised about many postcolonial writers—and indeed many contemporary writers, period. What is of more interest than simply the transition from fixed identity to unhinged hybridity, however, is to interrogate where that “space” that Berensmeyer alludes to without naming actually exists. For Muldoon, the “space of cultural translatability, of sudden connections and separations” is the environment itself—the pastoral, the rural, the natural. In “Black Horse,” the natural wonder of the hurricane’s flood becomes the stage from which Muldoon is able to view the complicated dance of he and his wife’s hybrid immigrant life in the United States—Berensmeyer’s shadowy and non-descript “space” becomes a literal place.

Written upon the landscape itself in “Black Horse,” Berensmeyer’s concept of cultural translation and fluidity is particularly evident as Irish canal diggers float alongside Polish-Jewish children and Prohibition rum-runners, and Muldoon simultaneously invokes the Irish Famine and the Holocaust as part of the same flow of history into America. The past and present is tumbled together willy-nilly, a mix of Irish, Eastern European, and American influences. This unstable identity is a concept that Christopher Malone has also discussed regarding Muldoon, writing,

The poet’s dislocations are framed discursively, *always already*—they represent a kind of postmodern displacement which undermines any possibility that the subject might ground identity in relation to a stable reading of history, or draw meaning from fixed social coordinates. Past and present merge together and disorient subjectivity; poetic verse works against any controlling perspective by announcing time and again its failed authenticity. (1086)

Malone’s reading of Muldoon’s work relies on a decentering, a refusal to locate a stable historical, geographic, or cultural nexus. I contend that, for Muldoon, the antidote to such a decentered postcolonial existence is the return to the pastoral, the rural, the environmental, as a touchstone. This is not to say that the pastoral or environmental is an attempt to look backwards

or to stand still—in fact, as “Black Horse” clearly indicates, the environment can work to ground notions of fluid identity even as it allows for significant, even cross-Atlantic, movement.

Waterways populate Muldoon’s pastoral, from transatlantic crossings to rural riverbeds, and they offer both movement and stability, a grounding that is never fully grounded. For instance, the differing strains of identity and experience mingling in “Black Horse” appear to have come out of the “wind bred on the Atlantic,” a descriptor Muldoon cribbs from Yeats that can be ostensibly applied to Hurricane Floyd within the poem, but is almost certainly a gesture towards transatlantic crossings, as well (*Moy Sand and Gravel* 100).

In “Black Horse,” Muldoon creates a rush of cultural tropes, characters, and identities that speak to the mobile identity of the American immigrant—particularly the Irish and Jewish experiences. In typical Muldoon fashion, the overfull canal creates a postmodern mix of time and place, a moment where his wife’s ancestors can mingle with his own, where the fantastic floats by as a matter of course, and the whole experience is hyphenated with the flotsam of contemporary society—Do Not Litter or Open This End, quotidian instructions for survival and manners in modern America. “Black Horse” is in and of itself a romp of cultural tropes and stereotypes, the kind of caricatures which Muldoon finds joy in sending up (the river)—ultimately, though, beyond that “ripping good yarn” quality that so often holds sway in Muldoon’s funny and frenetic end poems, “Black Horse” and its torrential flood speaks to the continued power and presence of the natural and environmental in a contemporary and postcolonial space. The flood, the long arm of nature’s law, serves as focal point for identity that allows the complexly hybrid nature of diasporic identity to remain somehow still tethered—grounded literally in the ground, in nature. The flood enacts, through its own natural and devastating power, a connective tissue between Muldoon’s suburban front lawn and the pastoral

spaces of the previous chapter. In both instances, in both places, the environment offers a space from which identity can be tethered.

When Space Becomes Place: “The Waking Father” and “The Lass of Aughrim”

“At the Sign of the Black Horse 1999” is a grandiose poem, making huge, sweeping statements about the flow of culture through the metaphor of a huge, sweeping storm. The next two poems I consider are both much smaller, in terms of literal size and in overall scope. One is set entirely in Ireland, the other entirely out of it, but both use water as a space where translation and transformation, even hybridity, might be possible.

“The Waking Father” appears in Muldoon’s first collection, *New Weather* (1973). The poem begins with the narrator and his father fishing for spricklies in the Oona (a river in Ireland). It is a cozily rural scene, but Muldoon promptly complicates any simplicity with grandiose questions of life and death, of sterility and the possibility of regeneration. Another of Muldoon’s “father figure” poems, “The Waking Father” once again enacts a father who is a sometime-stand-in for Ireland itself; however, in this case, the father figure’s proximity to the Oona River renders him more mutable, less fixed, than in the incarnations included in the discussion from Chapter Three.

At its outset, “The Waking Father” evokes a pleasant camaraderie between the father and son, although the familial tableaux is somewhat ironized by the narrator, who comments that the fish “have us feeling righteous, / The way we have thrown them back / Our benevolence is astounding” (9). Quickly, however, the powerful benevolence of the narrator and his father is effaced, as the narrator imagines that the hunter and hunted might switch places. He watches his father, standing in the shallow edge of the river, and imagines that “the spricklies might have been piranhas” (9). In the space of a few lines, the river transforms from a space of familiarity,

even mastery, to one of potential danger, a “red carpet / rolling out” from where the father stands, an imagine implying both nobility and blood (9).

From here the narrator moves from the potential for danger to envisioning his father’s death, and the poem becomes an eerie elegy for a still-living man:

Or I wonder now if he is dead or sleeping
For if he is dead I would have his grave
Secret and safe,
I would turn the river out of its course,
Lay him in its bed, bring it round again. (9-10)

It is a grandiose, if ultimately empty, gesture, to imagine the river as his father’s grave, to imagine himself “turning the river out” to place his father in its (death)bed, then conjuring the water to flow over him once more. The narrator imagines the river-as-grave would be “secret and safe,” flowing over the father’s body continuously. There remains, however, a double-edge to the poem—after all, before the river was transformed into a grave, it seemed anything but safe, as the sprinklies become piranhas. And, of course, “The Waking Father” implies a man neither sleeping nor dead, and yet the poem ends with his body at the bottom of the Oona River.

In becoming the imagined grave of the father figure, the Oona is marked as a space of “safekeeping” of the father, that shorthand-for-Ireland symbol; of course, as the river is overrun with piranhas, we recognize it to be a dangerous, potentially threatening place—the rural, pastoral simplicity of the river is not enough to render it as safe. The Oona becomes an imagined “home” for the father figure, but one that is neither still nor secure. Instead, the security of the environment is destabilized throughout.

The poem ends with these remarks on the father:

No one would question
That he had treasures or his being a king
Telling now of the real fish further down. (10)

The father becomes a king who tells of fish—or a fisher king, that Arthurian protector of the Holy Grail who, upon being injured, suffers not only his own wounds but a subsequent sterility of his lands. The fisher king's sterility renders his homelands barren, a “wasteland” a la T. S. Eliot.

Muldoon's waking father conjures a pastoral vision here that we can read as being at odds with Heaney's overly fertile bogs and wells; for the waking father, the fisher king, his wounds at the hands of the environment itself render Ireland sterile. However, that reading of “The Waking Father,” of the poem as a meditation on aging and the loss of fertility either individually or nationally, is short-sighted at best, not doing justice to Muldoon's capacity for multiplicity, even at that early stage of his career when “The Waking Father” was published. Instead, the power of water in Muldoon's work should not be underestimated. Like Heaney's “Personal Helicon,” poetry offers a way out of environmental conundrums. For Heaney, poetry provides him with the opportunity to experience childhood joys with nature anew, breathing new life into old places and experiences. For Muldoon, this regeneration is taken one step further—the poet can not only rekindle childhood experiences, but literally wake the dead, “bring it round again,” and reanimate sterile landscapes. As the title of the poem itself suggests, “The Waking Father” deals with sterility and death only inasmuch as it purports to overcome them, ultimately valorizing not death but rebirth. That this rebirth happens in water, while the father is literally laid to rest in the bed of the river, is unsurprising, given the power Muldoon has attributed to bodies of water in his conception of an Irish pastoral.

Published fourteen years after “The Waking Father,” “The Lass of Aughrim” appeared in *Meeting the British* (1987) and offers a very different river and a very different view of Irish identity. However, like “The Waking Father,” “The Lass of Aughrim” capitalizes on the river as

an image of fluid history and shifting identity. Set in South America, “The Lass of Aughrim” evokes the legacy of imperialism that haunts Irish history; in this poem, however, it is the Irish who are colonizing, not colonized. This double bind, a dual role as villain and victim of the British Empire, speaks not only to a transnational, global Irish identity, but also to the complexity of what it means to be Irish, and how that meaning might shift and change in stark, troubling ways when we consider the Irish and Ireland from various geographic points. Because of the difficulty this poem raises in how we think about Ireland’s relationship to empire, “The Lass of Aughrim” lends itself up to a reading of just the sort this project wishes to consider, which questions the potential implications and rewards of categorizing Irish writing as postcolonial.

“The Lass of Aughrim” takes place on “a tributary of the Amazon” while the narrator watches a young Indian boy with the potentially ironic moniker of Jesus, playing the flute for tourists. The narrator quickly recognizes the tune being played:

Imagine my delight
When we cut the outboard motor
And I recognize the strains
Of *The Lass of Aughrim*.

‘He hopes,’ Jesus explains,
‘to charm
Fish from the water

On what was the tibia
Of a priest
From a long-abandoned Mission.’ (159)

The exchange between the local boy and the visiting Irishman is brief but loaded, a moment of powerful, strange hybridity. Homi Bhabha has written extensively of such moments, when the colonized subject is revealed to be not a pure Other identity, but rather a subjectivity drawn from numerous sources, a self that is created in part by reacting to and against colonial forces.

Hearing “The Lass of Aughrim” played on a flute made of human bones must certainly be one of the uncanny moments in which such hybridity is encountered. Bhabha identifies great subversive power for the colonized in such a moment on the border of cultures: “The margin of hybridity, where culture differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience” (296). In “The Lass of Aughrim,” Muldoon recreates just such a moment, when a ‘native’ boy “steps out of the forest,” suggestive of Conrad’s jungles, and proceeds to play an Irish folk tune (159).

There is much to unpack in this encounter, not the least of which is how “The Lass of Aughrim” invokes a space where the Irish are not colonized but colonizer. The proof of the Irish implication in the British colonial project is all too clear as the strains of the folksong arise from Jesus’s flute of bone. And the encounter begs the question—to what extent are the Irish culpable for Empire-building? At what point do the differences between the situations of the Irish tourist and Jesus the flute player render the discussion of their shared traits as colonized citizens moot? It is not entirely the aim of this project to answer such a question, inasmuch as it is to speculate that acknowledging the uneasy situation of the Irish on the edges of both colonizer and colonized complicates and enriches the way we read postcolonial literature and consider the postcolonial canon, troubling easy binaries. Instead, for this project, I am much more interested in how, on that Amazon river tributary, a space that is both rooted in the environment and endlessly, literally fluid, we encounter the indigenous boy, Irish culture, and the specter of the British empire that must have brought the two groups into contact. The failed Mission trip has left Jesus not with a devotion to the Christ of his namesake, as it was no doubt intended to do, but has left the vestiges of a foreign culture nonetheless. In Jesus’s hands, “The Lass of Aughrim” becomes a tool to “charm” fish, a move we might recognize as one of Bhabha’s instances of potentially subversive

mimicry, where the colonized re-imagines a colonizer's piece of culture or behavior, altering it in a small but significant way. Clair Wills has written of "The Lass of Aughrim" that it "reflects on the way something 'long abandoned' may still have power, on how remains, transformed in the imagination, may become relics" (*Reading Paul Muldoon* 114). In this instance, the song and the flute of bones are not even merely a surreal relic of a complicated colonial past, but a tool of potentially magical power, capable of "charming" fish out of the water. And how should we read such power? Does it belong to the boy, or is it given to him by the poet himself—a poet who is gifting the subaltern with speech? It is a complicated question, one to which any potential answers reside in how one might wish to read an Irish poet—as colonizer or colonized. In this instance, of course, the Irishman is part and parcel of the British empire. If, as a Northern Irish poet, Muldoon is privy to a particular understanding of what it means to be under the Empire's heel, does that give him license to speak for any other group who might have experienced a similar relationship to the Crown? At what point does Ireland's own complicity in the imperial project of its neighbor render it equally culpable? "The Lass of Aughrim" raises, but does not deign to answer, such questions.

The particular song that Jesus plays is also significant: "The Lass of Aughrim" is no random Irish folksong, but the song that Gretta Conroy hears in James Joyce's "The Dead," the song that triggers her to remember her long-dead Galway lover, Michael Furey. When Muldoon's narrator encounters "The Lass of Aughrim," it is already famous for its literary ability to conjure the past. For Gretta Conroy's husband the song is a poignant reminder that there is much of his wife's past that he does not know or understand; similarly, the folk song works in Muldoon's poem as a reminder that the past is more complex than we know—and that even the familiar (a folksong we have sung since childhood) can be made strange, can contain

multitudes that we have never considered. The poem ends with Jesus's explanation of why he plays the song, and what his instrument is made of, and so we can only imagine what must be the narrator's horror at finding that the song he was so "delighted" to hear is being played on the bones of a long-dead priest on a Mission.⁷⁰

Literary antecedents aside, the song itself is also an apt metaphor for the uneasy relationship between the Irish tourist and the South American flute player. In the most common versions of the tune (there are many, as with all folk songs), a young girl, the lass in question, appears on a lord's doorstep with a babe in her arms, seeking shelter from the cold from the man who is obviously her child's father. The lord asks her to prove her identity by recalling the token that the two passed between them when they first met. In most versions, the token is a handkerchief—and in most versions, the song ends with the lass either "going down to sleep" in the cold or even in a watery grave.⁷¹ The subtext is brutally obvious—the sordid connection between the lord and lass will have to be buried at all costs. Of course, however, such a refusal of the past is impossible—the child's presence is testament to the lord and lass's connection. In versions of the folk song where the lass and her baby are drowned, the lord often ends up wandering out into the wild to try to find them or "be with" them, ostensibly drowning himself. In the context of Muldoon's poem, we might suggest that the same lesson applies. Even if both the Irish tourist and Jesus the flute player might rather erase their association, once they have

⁷⁰ Plumbing the unknown depths of the familiar is a concept to which Muldoon has returned numerous times, utilizing what Freud termed in 1919 the uncanny. Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). However, Freud cautions, not ever new experience might qualify: "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny" (221). In both "The Lass of Aughrim" and many of the naïve narrator poems I wrote about in Chapter Three, Muldoon uses what Freud terms the uncanny—an apt notion for thinking through both childhood and colonialism.

⁷¹ This reading provides fodder for thinking about how water has functioned for Muldoon—as a womb-like space of regeneration. Even in "The Waking Father," water burial indicates the possibility of rebirth. For the lass of Aughrim, any such rebirth is far from literal—she lives on only in song—but, as Muldoon shows, that song can and will travel far and wide.

met, a “token” been exchanged, there is no undoing it. The two are forever linked. Clair Wills, in writing of the importance of the folk song to the poem, notes that “In Muldoon’s poem the narrative of sexual betrayal, and the abiding presence of past love [that are both so important to the folksong], is a subtext, with the weight of ‘the dead’ placed on the dead Irish Missionaries, whose legacy lives on in Irish music, in the naming of the guide Jesus, in the faith invested in the magical power of the missionary’s bone” (*Reading Paul Muldoon* 115). For the purposes of this project, the importance of such a connection is not that it illustrates so neatly the difficulties of easily labeling the Irish experience as either colonized or colonizer (although it certainly does that), but that Muldoon uses water as the conduit that moves his discussion of the pastoral out of Ireland and into a global, transnational context—while also managing to keep wholly alive the connection to Ireland through the famous folksong. Water once again is the space where cultural connections can occur, and where new ideas and experiences can be borne out. The conduit for these connections does not always assure positive outcomes (as this poem surely indicates), but nonetheless it is a body of water that allows the action to occur.

In both “The Waking Father” and “The Lass of Aughrim,” rivers become sites where Irish identity is played out and questioned, existing either at home, on the Oona River, or half a world away, on an unnamed tributary to the Amazon where the Irish have left their mark—and had marks left upon their bones. The two poems showcase the fluid, global nature of Irish identity, ever-shifting and unstable. Discussing Muldoon’s representations of Irish identity, Omaar Hena claims boldly, “Muldoon revolutionizes what it means to be Irish, recovering the national category through its very hybridization and globalization” (244). By Hena’s conception, then, we might ultimately argue that the river in “The Lass of Aughrim” is *more* suggestive of Irish identity than “The Waking Father,” despite geography. Hena further unsettles the notion of

a stable Irish identity rooted in Ireland, writing, “Muldoon’s vision of Irishness is fluid, porous, openended, and globalized and yet constituted, at its heart . . . by . . . cross-cultural trauma that is inextricably tied to other dispossessed diasporas around the world. Even when at home, Muldoon suggests, Irishness is always already unhoused, unhomely” (244). Hena’s assertions speak to the nature of Irish identity in both poems—a permeable, unrooted concept that never settles, even when it is spatially “home.”

However unhoused Irish identity might be, and it is nothing if not global and mobile (as are most identities in an increasingly diasporic world), this project seeks to argue that, for Muldoon (and Heaney, albeit in different ways), Irish identity is not completely untethered despite its fluidity and “unhomely-ness.” Rather, through Muldoon’s invocation of a pastoral, rural, natural landscape, we are buoyed up and rooted—even if Muldoon uses a South American river or the lawn of his New Jersey home in order to establish such a landscape. Muldoon uses landscape very purposely to tether Irish identity—even when that identity has moved beyond Ireland’s increasingly porous borders.⁷²

“Two Streams Coming Together”: Watery Metaphors for Colonization

In “Meeting the British” (from the collection of the same name), published in 1987 following some of The Troubles’ most violent and vexed years, Muldoon writes what is arguably his most overtly political poem, the moment in which he takes his most direct stand against

⁷² As I have written this chapter, I have been reminded time and again of Gerald O’Hara, Scarlett O’Hara’s very Irish father in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Gerald is in many ways an Irish stereotype throughout the novel—he speaks in a heavy brogue (reminding us that Mitchell’s problematic patois extends beyond Mammy’s “yes’suh” and nah’suh”), drinks heavily and recklessly, and disparages his Scots-Irish neighbors as “goddamn Orangemen.” However, he also puts great stock into the Georgia soil of his plantation, Tara. The plantation is named after the ancient home of Ireland’s kings and queens—from the outset, it has been Gerald’s stand-in for Ireland in America. In one memorable scene, Gerald scoops the red Georgia dirt into his daughter’s hands, urgently reminding her that as long as she has this, she always has something. Muldoon’s use of the pastoral is, of course, not nearly so direct or so simple, but the connection between Muldoon and Mitchell might still be worth noting: namely, as a reminder that the pastoral has long been an integral part of the immigrant experience, and has remained so even when the immigrants in question are living increasingly urban lives.

British intervention. In typically fluid Muldoon fashion, however, the poem is not set in Ireland—and in fact, it does not even involve any Irish characters. Rather, “Meeting the British” imagines an encounter during the French and Indian War between a Native American and the infamous General Jeffrey Amherst, whose claim to fame is possibly having been responsible for instituting germ warfare against the Native Americans through the purposeful introduction of smallpox through infected blankets.

Amherst has become a polarizing figure among historians, with some pointing to letters written by Amherst to Colonel Henry Bouquet suggesting genocidal intent. In one letter he muses, “Could it not be contrived to send the *Small Pox* among those disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem in our power to reduce them,” and in another he suggests in a postscript that smallpox-infested blankets could “inoculate the Indians,” which seems particularly menacing (Jeffrey Amherst and Smallpox Blankets). Although historians cannot agree entirely on whether or not this plan was conclusively carried out, the historical record does show a devastating outbreak of smallpox among the tribesmen that Amherst came into contact with at the time the letters were written. In the context that Muldoon provides in “Meeting the British,” Amherst is every bit the villain, as the meeting between the narrator, a Native American tribesman, and Colonel Amherst results in this exchange:

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. (*Collected Poems: 1968-1998*
160-161)

There is something singularly horrible about this “gift” from Amherst; perhaps even worse than the blankets are the fishhooks, with their supposed promise of goodwill. And, too, there is the contained horror of the careful recounting of artifacts: six hooks, two blankets.

Perhaps more important than that horrific end to the poem, however, is how the scene begins. “Meeting the British” is about nothing if not the clash of cultures, and Muldoon indicates such a potentially dangerous meeting in the poem’s setting, a frozen-over river:

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) (160-61)

The noise of the two bodies of water, freezing and cracking, shifting and creaking, offers an ominous backdrop—and, for our purposes, complicates the notion of rivers as sites of fluid identity, since in this case the “dead of winter” has rendered such fluidity moot. Instead of fluid exchanges, we encounter frozen, static crashing between bodies of water, between culture and ideas. Muldoon describes the crashing as “the sound of two streams coming together,” but such a description is really an impossibility—if both streams are frozen, they cannot truly come together at all. Instead, a violent and crashing encounter is all that such a connection offers.

The narrator hears himself “calling out in French” to General Amherst and Colonel Bouquet, a sound that he finds “no less strange” than the crashing of ice floes (160). His language of choice makes clear that this is not his first encounter with Europeans, although it may be his most deadly. Some critics have found the presence of French a complicating factor in reading the poem, a lingual presence that renders a so-called “simple” reading of “Meeting the British” as a poem about the evils of colonization moot. For instance, Clair Wills has written,

‘Meeting the British’ is an arresting but difficult poem . . . As many critics have noted, the title encourages us to think in terms of the political relationship between Britain and Ireland, but the poem offers to the reader no firm political ground to stand on. The question of ‘sides’ is a complicated one, not least because the speaker in the poem, the poet figure, bridges the gap between the warring parties by ‘calling out in French’ to his enemies. Through his role as a spokesperson he becomes party to the betrayal of his people. (*Reading Paul Muldoon* 116)

Wills offers what is perhaps sage advice when reading any Muldoon poem—there is rarely any “firm political ground” to stand on, and that one might be sorely disappointed if that is the goal of any reading, as Muldoon has attested to over and over in interviews. However, Wills’ reading of the use of French by the narrator is also reductive. His use of French seems to me less indicative of his “betrayal of his people” in some zero-sum game between Us and Them, but a testament to the complicated nature of colonization, a process that, in reality, involves more players than Us and Them.⁷³ This very reality makes “Meeting the British” such an interesting poem, in that Muldoon is able to both complicate the simple binary of colonized and colonizer without letting the British off the (fish)hook for the atrocities that are committed against the Native Americans. Amherst and Bouquet are the unmitigated villains here, and yet they did not simply show up one day on the shores of the New World with murder in their hearts. The process was more complicated and involved more players—and in that one line, the narrator “calling out in French,” a move that he himself recognizes as “strange”—such complications and complicities are made obvious.

Jonathan Hufstader, in his reading of “Meeting the British,” offers an analysis that encapsulates the difficulties of a global, postcolonial existence—the very existence that Muldoon would have been wrestling with during the decade when “Meeting the British” was written and when Muldoon was leaving Ireland for America:

⁷³ Homi Bhabha, certainly, has advocated for thinking that moves beyond this sort of binary, as have other scholars concerned with hybridity, third spaces, and in general anti-binary conceptions of postcoloniality.

Although the speaker of the dramatic monologue [in “Meeting the British”] is native American, the voice is the voice of Muldoon—and for a reason. His book is a collection of poems largely about becoming an expatriate poet; “Meeting the British” thus paradoxically means “Coming to America.” Having symbolically imported the Mescalero Apache into native Irish consciousness, Muldoon now exports that hybrid consciousness (Apache-Irish) to the land of the native American and meets the British. Attempting to go west from Ireland, he finds himself going east; attempting to appropriate an American tribal voice, he meets a British voice, the voice of one listening to speakers of a foreign language. Exporting himself as Irish and playing with a politically correct analogy of native Irish to native American, “native” Muldoon finds himself in the paradoxical position of bartering with the British. “In the dead of winter,” then, Muldoon depicts a consciousness replicating itself in completely new circumstances, but replicating that consciousness just as the old one was, frozen solid in its own identification with violence, whether tribal or colonial. His ironic depictions of colonialism and trade serve as a metaphor for a consciousness which seeks but does not find the means of changing one thing for another. (168)

Hufstader is interested here in Muldoon’s appropriation of voice and the ultimate pay-off of such an appropriation—which is, at bottom, simply the realization that colonization leaves behind a global mess, one in which identities no longer hold shape or form, either one’s own or someone else’s one might wish to don. For Hufstader, it leaves behind a “consciousness which seeks but does not find,” resulting in a consciousness that is “frozen solid”—rendering “Meeting the British” among Muldoon’s most problematic water poems, important to this chapter but also existing somewhat at a remove from the other poems included here.

“Meeting the British” uses waterways to bring the cosmopolitan to the rural—the global to the local. But, as the poem makes so starkly clear, such exchanges are rarely fair and sometimes not even particularly fluid, as is the case here. The two bodies of water are already frozen over—unyielding, unbending, more likely to crack and crash into destruction than meld into something resembling hybridity. In most of the water poems included in this chapter, the bodies of water are conduits for history and identity, a way for place to transcend space and for Ireland to move beyond its borders, for the Irish pastoral to become global while remaining local.

Here, however, Muldoon acknowledges the dangers of such movements of people and cultures; it is hard to find any merit in the encounter in “Meeting the British.” And that, ultimately, is why I find this poem to be Muldoon’s most overt reaction to the Troubles. Here, there is no careful sidestep, no acknowledging of atrocities on both sides, and only a cursory nod to the complicated histories that haunt all colonial and postcolonial landscapes. The weight of history, “Meeting the British” argues, is fully present and undeniable, but it is no panacea for the fishhooks and blankets of empire.

‘As If Washing Could Make it Clean’: Returns to the Moy

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that within Muldoon’s poetry we can find a recurrent theme of bodies of water, rivers in particular, which operate as metaphors for Irish identity. Poems discussed here have ranged from the Oona River to the Amazon, from Ireland to New Jersey to Canada, from rivers to tributaries, from streams to devastating floods. I will finish by looking at two poems, one from quite early in Muldoon’s career and another more recent, both located at the Blackwater, a river from Muldoon’s childhood. Both “Dancers at the Moy” and “Moy Sand and Gravel” revolve around the image of the water, in these cases the Blackwater River, as metaphors for Irish identity, as a potential way to move from the pastoral to the cosmopolitan and back again, as a way to render Irishness both grounded and mobile.

In the first poem, “Dancers at the Moy,” “(*New Weather*, 1973), the Blackwater River becomes the site of a failed rendezvous with the outside world; the Blackwater is posited as a space where a trade between the “local people” and a group of outsiders is supposed to occur, but does not. It is a moment, Tim Kendall writes, where Muldoon “merges history and myth as [he] recounts a local economic disaster,” and that “Muldoon’s rural background is typically transmuted through the poetic resources of folklore, parable, and myth” (37-38). “Dancers at the

Moy,” as Kendall astutely notes, is an early example of Muldoon’s career-spanning fascination with folklore and myth. Of more interest to this project, however, is not Muldoon’s use of parable, but the overwhelming presence of the Blackwater River. The story that “Dancers at the Moy” tells does not, necessarily, require the Blackwater River in its telling. However, the presence of the river is overwhelming; by the poem’s end, the river itself has become a character. Once again, bodies of water become conduits for the global and the local to meet—or not meet, as is the case in “Dancers at the Moy,” when an encounter with outsiders is slated to occur but does not, with terrible repercussions.⁷⁴

The banks of the Blackwater teem with the comings and goings of the Moy fair, where the local people have housed groups of horses, expecting them to be bought as warhorses for “one or other Greek war” (10). The people expect the horses to be sold soon, and bring only a small amount of food with them, but

No band of Athenians
Arrived at the Moy fair
To buy for their campaign

Peace having been declared
And a treaty signed. (11)

The peace treaty, unknown to the people of the Moy, means that the horses are never sold, and instead starve to death on the Blackwater’s banks waiting for buyers who will never come. The starving horses are desperate, and “ate the flesh of each other / Like people in famine” (11). As the horses suffer and die in a crisis that could have so easily been averted, the Blackwater flows on and on through the poem, a force that we see first “turning its stones / Over hour after hour,” then “unable to contain / itself,” then finally ending “as a trickle of brown,” where it “hobbled on

⁷⁴ David Farrier, writing about the role of water in the Israel/Palestine conflict, writes that “in an age of liquidity, the capacity to move efficiently through space is cultivated as an attribute of power,” which is certainly true in “Dancers at the Moy” (189).

its stones / with a wild stagger / and sag in its backbone” (110). The river emulates the horses, becomes them when it hobbles, staggers, sags. Born out in the Blackwater is the weight of history, of lives lost, of the atrocity of starvation.⁷⁵

But as the poem ends, however, the incredible weight of sorrowful history is lightened:

The local people gathered
Up the white skeletons.
Horses buried for years
Under the foundations
Give their earthen floors
The ease of trampolines. (11)

In the last stanza, the dancers at the Moy are recast not as desperate horses but as survivors, as the local people of the Moy who live out their lives walking above the bones of a famine. The effect of a violent past is not a weight but a loosening, a “trampoline” for future generations to dance upon. Admittedly, the Blackwater is not entirely responsible for this rendering of history as a “trampoline”—and yet the Blackwater is the central image of the poem, emulating the “sag and stagger” of the horses, of the people themselves. The river is a space both rooted and mobile, endlessly mutable and transformative, as its shape-shifting presence in “Dancers at the Moy” indicates.

The Blackwater appears again in “Moy Sand and Gravel,” published 29 years after “Dancers at the Moy” (appearing in 2002’s *Moy Sand and Gravel*). It is a short poem, containing only two six-line stanzas. A young narrator recalls vividly his amazement that, upon

⁷⁵ It is a direct and perhaps unwieldy reference to the Potato Famine that the horses starve while waiting on a rescue that does not come—and such a heavy-handed allusion might not have made it into Muldoon’s later collections. However, it is worth noting that these horses starve in a country that has enough grain to feed them because they are waiting for the arrival of outsiders; meanwhile, during the Potato Famine, one million people died of starvation despite there being enough food to feed the entire population of Ireland. (Another million people emigrated, meaning that the total population of Ireland dropped by nearly a quarter.) Starvation happened not because there was not enough food, but because British landowners continued to export crops out of Ireland rather than using the yields to feed the Irish. The occurrence at “Dancers at the Moy” is not a direct correlation—but the pointed invocation of the word famine, in conjunction with the devastating wait for outside intervention that does not come, certainly bears mentioning.

emerging from the local movie theater, time has continued to pass normally outside that artificial environment of the cinema. He is shocked that

In the time it took a dolly to travel
Along its little track
To the point where two movie stars' heads
And their kiss filled the whole screen.

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. (16)

The movie theater offers a transnational space—we might reasonably assume that the young Irish narrator is watching American movie stars kissing on screen—but that bit of Hollywood make-believe is juxtaposed with the refinery at Moy Sand and Gravel, the “smackety-smack” of the onscreen kiss occurring only a few steps away from the towers where the stones and silt are “dredged from the Blackwater” to be washed and washed again. Even in a place like the movie theater, a simulated environment of perfectly polished celebrity romance, the current of the Blackwater rushes past outside, the flow of the river a constant presence, just as the flow of cultures across the Atlantic is playing out onscreen. Like so many of Muldoon's poems, the reality of the Irish landscape is bolstered by the presence of the foreign, the other, the wordly, the not-Ireland—in this case, two kissing movie stars.

It is the final lines of “Moy Sand and Gravel,” however, that lend the poem its gravity. The sand and gravel that has been pulled up from the much of the Blackwater can be washed, but that washing, Muldoon implies, may never actually cleanse it, and the narrator expresses disbelief that the Blackwater's grime can ever fully be removed from the gravel it yields. When we remember that the Blackwater of “Moy Sand and Gravel” is the same Blackwater beside

which the horses starved in “Dancers at the Moy,” it is no wonder that its contents cannot be washed clean of the river’s past. The presence of history in the present is powerful, even inescapable, in these offerings, and “Moy Sand and Gravel” in particular makes clear that Muldoon is not using bodies of water as spaces that might erase or purify the past; in fact, water performs nearly the opposite function. Rather than eradicating or cleansing the past, water offers natural (dare I say pastoral) landscapes that allow for fluidity and movement that brings the past into the present—a space where the past is not erased but is brought flooding forth, sometimes painful and almost always messy but present, teeming with life and death.

In each of the poems in this chapter, bodies of water operate as currents of history, as pastoral spaces that double as metaphors for flow of the past into the present, of Irish roots into the global, emigrated world of the twentieth and twenty-first century. In Muldoon’s hands, rivers and streams (and even floods) become a natural symbol for his conception of Irish identity and history—an ever-changing, unstable, nonetheless present force that moves through space and time, through cultures and countries, an apt metaphor of the fluid presence of history. And, too, in Muldoon’s hands and afloat on his rivers the “cozy” pastoral landscape poem is launched full-tilt into the twenty-first century, bridging the gap between rural and urban, between pastoral and cosmopolitan and back again.

For Muldoon, water offers a messy, chaotic space of equal parts potential danger and probably rebirth and regeneration. Bodies of water are not necessarily clean; in fact, the grimy detritus of many of Muldoon’s bodies of water turns the water-as-cleansing-solution metaphor on its head. Instead, watery spaces are messy and overwhelming—truly more reminiscent of the reality of birth than a pristinely clean cascade that might wash away the past. Instead, Muldoon’s messily feminine rivers and floods allow both great movement and a kind of tethering

to the natural in spite of and in the context of that movement. For Muldoon, water can move us through space, place, time, and culture—without ever estranging us entirely from home.

CODA

As I have written this dissertation, the latter few months of writing have been undertaken with a heavy heart, each word informed by the all-too-early passing of Seamus Heaney. I never had the opportunity to hear him speak, much less shake his hand or introduce myself, but I always assumed I would get the chance to do so one day.⁷⁶ As I have been thinking much of Heaney's passing as I work, it seems only appropriate to address that loss head-on here, as I conclude this project. In a column written for Heaney upon his death, Muldoon remarked of Heaney:

I met Seamus Heaney in 1968. I was 16 years old and he was 28, already a famous poet on the strength of *Death of a Naturalist*, his first groundbreaking collection. I say "groundbreaking" because, though we may trace its DNA back through Patrick Kavanagh to William Wordsworth, there was something quite new about the best of those poems. The engagement with the things of the world was so unadorned as to invite comparison with John Clare—yes, except a clearer John Clare.

That very clarity may have been one of the reasons why Seamus Heaney was an instant popular success. More significantly, though, was the availability of his subject matter. Though we understood that poetry about the everyday had been a hallmark of everything from Romanticism through modernism to the New York School, rarely had we seen such a high quotidian quota. The stuff of small-farm life—plows, horses, frogs—may have seemed exotic to some readers, but not to readers from Ireland. Heaney had the great gift of making it look easy and, moreover, making others feel that they could probably write a poem about a plow, a horse, or a frog. (*My Friend Seamus*)

Muldoon identifies Heaney's way of writing—particularly those early poems, those poems of plows, horses, frogs—as being unadorned engagements with the world. Indeed, though he never uses the word, Muldoon is writing of the importance, the centrality, of the pastoral to Heaney's work. He goes on to call Heaney, "the only poet I can think of who was recognized worldwide

⁷⁶ In that terribly awkward and self-aware way that graduate students introduce themselves to the subjects of their research. Upon meeting Paul Muldoon, I remarked to a colleague that it might be easier had I chosen to write about Wordsworth, as it would have prevented me from fawning over him in person.

as having moral as well as literary authority and, as such, may be the last major poet to even entertain such a possibility.”

As Muldoon discusses in this essay, Heaney’s work throughout his career shifted and changed from the supposed “simplicity” of his early poems and became increasingly more complex and global in scale—without ever losing his earthy Irish roots. Now, with Heaney’s passing, we are left to wonder what is next for Irish pastoralism. If Heaney was the undisputed poet laureate of bogs and small farms, of plows and frogs, then who shall pick up the reigns that he has put down? Will we leave the pastoral behind now, a relic now out of place in the twenty-first century?

My answer, of course, is no. With Heaney’s passing, the landscape of Irish poetry is changed—changed utterly. However, that is not to say that his interest in the pastoral will die with him. Muldoon, at sixty-three, is still writing prolifically—and, with any luck, will continue to do so for decades. Although Muldoon’s pastoral rarely resembles that of his friend and sometime teacher, Seamus Heaney, I have been at pains in this project to show that it is still a pastoral vision of the world, however much it might flow in and out of Ireland, however firmly Muldoon’s tongue might be in his cheek, however much his pastoral vision of Northern Ireland might be populated with the exotic, the spectacular, the performative. And, beyond Muldoon, we are lucky enough to find many other Irish poets who are writing about nature in various ways. Medbh McGuckian (of Muldoon’s generation) has been and continues to be a writer who engages with the natural in fascinating ways. Vona Groarke, still a toddler when Heaney published *Death of a Naturalist*, has written prolifically about natural and domestic spaces, as well. Perhaps it will be women writers who shape the pastoral next, opening up new lines of inquiry and analysis for the genre. A female pastoral mode, exploring the intimate, entangled

connections between the subjugation of the land and the subjugation of women, has already been written into existence in Northern Ireland, through the efforts of writers like McGuckian, Groarke, and Eavan Boland, who has engaged these issues as both a poet and a critic. The opportunities for a pastoral mode created with women at the helm renders Ireland no longer merely imagined *as* a woman but *by women*—truly a paradigm-shifting endeavor.

It has been my primary goal in this project, beyond the obvious one of crafting a comparison of Heaney and Muldoon that capitalizes not on their differences but on their similarities, to construct, as well, a defense of the pastoral as a genre that has the mutability and depth to offer powerful and creative options to contemporary poets—particularly those who are writing of, about, and from contested geopolitical spaces. The pastoral, with its thoroughly Anglicized background, is not an obvious choice for postcolonial analysis, but I hope to have illustrated here how it can be used and viewed subversively, not only in spite of but because of its very English roots.

This project has been, of course, an Irish one, and any sweeping statements I might make about postcoloniality must always be tempered by the fact that I am writing of one such postcolonial state, and one that is, even in the broadly conceived and widely varied definition of what constitutes a postcolonial space, something of an exception. Ireland, by its very proximity to England both literally and culturally, will never present itself and its literature in quite the same way as, say, a postcolonial state in the Southern hemisphere or the East, much farther from England. However, in the same breath, every country touched by the long-reaching arm of the British Empire has had a very different experience. To lump any of them together, to homogenize the experiences, the repercussions, is to, I think, miss the point. And so, I freely admit, a subordinate goal to mounting a defense of the pastoral as an important and potentially

resistant genre for twenty-first century poets has been to mount a defense of considering Ireland, and particularly Northern Ireland, as a postcolonial state. In thinking about Ireland in such a way, we are able to both expand the way that we read Irish writers, but also to expand and complicate the way we think about postcoloniality—surely an important and necessary exercise as we settle into the new millennia, and as our conceptions of borders and nations continue to be complicated and brought into question by the push of globalization.

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