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## *Poetic Discoveries & Inventions of America*

by DILLON JOHNSTON

WELL BEFORE St. Brendan had launched his all-ballast boat to discover America, Irish poets were inventing this land beyond the western islands.<sup>1</sup> In the Irish poetic flowering of the last three decades, America has taken its important place, both in the poetry itself and in the lives of the poets. As in the earliest Irish writing, America appears in recent poetry as discovered or invented territory: whale-roads, trails, or boulevards lead either back in time to disclose origins and primal mysteries or forward in time to come on new perspectives and narratives. To an extent, these two poetic directions align Irish poets with modernism and post-modernism respectively, while either offers Irish poets a multiple perspective on their own island not available to some other insular poetries.

To understand the importance of America to the poets themselves, we need only compare the current diaspora of writers to the one earlier in the century. Whereas Shaw, Joyce, O'Casey, Beckett, Coffey, MacGreevy, Stuart, O'Grady, and Hewitt took themselves to Britain or Europe for significant portions of their lives, currently only a few writers, such as Michael O'Loughlin or Matthew Sweeney, have headed east. On the other hand, with Brian Moore, the poets James Liddy, Eamon Grennan, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, John Montague, Derek Mahon, and Greg Delanty now make their principal living in the United States, and other poets fly over regularly for briefer residencies or readings. For example, in just this past year's migration, bardwatchers could observe Eavan Boland, Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley, Richard Murphy, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Macdara Woods, and probably others crossing to read or teach in the States. Beyond these sources of revenue, in the last decade American foundations have awarded very lucrative prizes to Paul Durcan, Richard Murphy, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Mahon—the latter two receiving some of the earliest Lannan Foundation grants of \$35,000 each—and American libraries have bought the literary remains of a half dozen Irish poets who are still among the quick and ambulatory. While no poet has soared into vertiginous tax brackets, some of these Irish poets have won positions

1. Brendan's incredible account of his discovery of America—*Navigatio Brendani*—appeared in the 8th or 9th centuries whereas *Imram Bran*, a fantasy voyage toward, if not to, an imaginary new world, was set down in the 8th century (see *Field Day Anthology*, I, 4, 45). Not strictly speaking, by *poets* I mean the inventors of these voyages to the other world.

and readers in America and, thereby, a beaker of envy from native poets such as Alfred Corn who, resisting the impressive emergence of Eamon Grennan, wrote recently in *Poetry* magazine:

No one can say that America has been inhospitable to the Irish Poets. On the contrary, we apparently prefer them to our own domestic product, greeting them with praise and university employment as soon as they present themselves. (O'Driscoll, 116)

Thirty years ago, at the inception of this present Irish poetic renaissance,<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, and Richard Murphy came to the U.S. as scholars or teachers. Within the greater variety of forms available in American poetry, Kinsella and Montague found flexible forms more congenial to their post-holocaust sense of the world than those forms offered by Yeats, Auden, or other Irish or British poets. William Carlos Williams' slack string, what Kinsella called his "creative relaxation in the face of complex reality,"<sup>3</sup> was helpful to both poets, as were the examples of Duncan to Montague and Pound to Kinsella. More recently, a conversational clarity from Bishop and Lowell entered and lightened Heaney's poetry with the publication of *Field Work* (1979), and the long seventeen-syllable line of C. K. Williams seemed the appropriate vehicle for Ciaran Carson's digressive narratives, *The Irish for No* (1987) and *Belfast Confetti* (1989).

However America may figure in the finances and poetic forms of Irish writers, it only rarely displaces Ireland as a setting or subject for poetry. Kinsella's resetting of a scribal poem in "Wyncote, Pennsylvania: A Gloss," Montague's representation of American landscape and energy in "All Legendary Obstacles," and Heaney's revision of Lowell's "Skunk Hour" are all celebrated anthology pieces. Personally, I treasure the Carolina setting of Muldoon's "Promises, Promises," Mahon's "The Globe in North Carolina," and Longley's "The Shack" as well as of poems by Grennan, Simmons, and Delanty. Nevertheless, recently America figures sizably as setting or subject only in works of Eamon Grennan, John Montague, and Paul Muldoon. And Grennan's very Irish attention to light and shadow, like a domestication of Mahon's "Light Music," often leaves the setting uncertain, for all the descriptive precision. We wait for azaleas and fireflies or fuchsia and larks to signal whether we are in New York or Ireland. In this sense, in reading Grennan's poetry, we defer location as, through the intermediacy of light, place yields to our time on earth.

### *Mother Country*

JOHN MONTAGUE'S entire career can be seen as an effort to understand his displacement from America as his mother country. In his twenties Montague thoroughly explored the United States: New Haven, Ames, Mississippi, and

2. The general public in the U.S. would be more likely to recognize a broader artistic renaissance in Ireland in which the names or works of poets would appear in conjunction with or promotion of films such as *Hear My Song* or *The Commitments* or musicians such as U2, Van Morrison, or Sinead O'Connor, or *Translations* or *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel.

3. John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 106.

Berkeley. However, he seems to have rediscovered his America later, in the early eighties, in the decade after his mother's death as he composed *The Dead Kingdom*. This discovery continued during both a tour of Brooklyn with *Newsday* feature writer Jim Mulvaney and negotiations concerning a distinguished professorship in the Writers' Institute William Kennedy founded in Albany. A deliberate exploration of the conditions of his birth and his birthplace led to a disclosure in *The Dead Kingdom* (1984) that he was "taken from a sick room:/as before from your flayed womb.//And given away to be fostered" ("Flowering Absence," *DK*, 89). In an autobiographical essay Montague confessed, "there is a natural hesitancy about disclosing the hiding places of one's power" (*Figure*, 13), and he might add even, or especially, to oneself. Yet, because the death of the mother sharpens the ache of ambivalence, the subsequent mourning often occasions self-exploration, including previously repressed memories. As Freud remarks in "The Uncanny":

There is a humorous saying: "Love is home-sickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, "this place is familiar to me, I have been there before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case, too, the *unheimlich* [the *uncanny*] is what was once *heimisch*, home-like, familiar; the prefix "un" is the token of repression. (*On Creativity*, 153)

After exposing in "A Flowering Absence" this "primal hurt," Montague writes: "There is an absence, real as presence. / . . . //All roads wind backwards to it" (90).

In light of this declaration, one might profitably read many, if not all, of Montague's small and large poetic journeys as quests for the mother country. For example, in one of Montague's earliest poems "The Water Carrier," he recalls his boyhood chore: "Twice daily I carried water from the spring" to which he now returns imaginatively to find that: "some pure thing,/Some living source, half-imagined and half-real//Pulses in the fictive water that I feel" (*Poisoned Lands*, 11). This poem is preliminary to Montague's sequences of journey poems which are first set in Northern Ireland. Many of these "circlings . . . to return" center on wells or water sources. In one of his Ellmann Lectures, Heaney called attention to "The Source," a central poem in *The Rough Field*. With a drunken expectation of finding "the ancient trout of wisdom," the poet slipped

A hand under the fringe of  
Each slick rock, splitting  
The skin of turning froth  
To find nothing but that  
Wavering pulse leading to  
The central heart where  
The spring beat so icy-cold.  
(*RF*, 52)

Heaney observes that the "nothing" disclosed is "both empty and pregnant . . . an energy that is written, a discharge from image, syntax and enjambment . . ." (70). As in Shelley's "Mont Blanc," the silence of nothingness, to which the poet is drawn, evokes the poem.

Elsewhere I have tried to demonstrate how, through various means derived

perhaps from French poets such as Reverdy and Ponge, Montague represents the limits of poetry when set against this silence.<sup>4</sup> From *The Dead Kingdom* forward, however, this silence is manifest in the maternal source, the hearth and womb from which he was expelled, a rejection for which the poet in his futile circling finally cannot account.<sup>5</sup> When this refugee of the womb claims fosterage from his American or Irish communities, his tone can become too insistent.<sup>6</sup> Yet, even if we do not appreciate this note in Montague's poetry, it has more claim for sympathy than censure from a nonpartisan reader.

In a recent essay, however, Gerald Dawe interprets Montague too narrowly as an Irish political poet, regretting that in an effort to make "an imaginative home for himself," Montague represents himself as a bard of "a powerful, monolithic and conservative literary cultural tradition" (Corcoran, 22). Although in *The Rough Field* Montague did concentrate on the North and edge into tones of the bard or tribal leader, he often modulated these tones ironically. Furthermore, he most often brandishes "poetry" and the poet's roles, personally or ontologically, in opposition to or accommodation with silence and with images of the womb and the unconscious, such as wells, bogs, and caves. In addition, the *actual* presence of America in the facts of his life, as well as its actual emergence in various poems in *The Dead Kingdom* and elsewhere, render an interpretation like Dawe's too one-dimensional. For the vibration that America—in its many actual, symbolic, and formal implications—gives to Montague's work is a necessary part of its texture.

From its first word *The Dead Kingdom* emphasizes direction over place in this search for the mother country as the poet is driven by a "terrible thirst. . . for love and knowledge" (89): "Northwards . . . / . . . / the salmon's leap / & pull to the source:/my wife, from the shore/at Roche's Point, calls/John, come in, come home,/your mother is dead" (11). This direction also opens the volume's most powerful poem "Northern Lights": "Northwards stream the wild/geese . . . / . . . the newly dead. . . / . . . lured by/the ultimate coldness. . ." (86). Although detailing how these associations of death adhere to Montague's representations of the womb, Antoinette Quinn recognizes that *The Dead Kingdom* circles back to vital images of the marriage bed and nursery. She asserts convincingly that the poet's interest in exhuming his mother into an accusatory light wins out over impulses to enter her grave (Quinn, 40-41). Consequently, the poet's statement that in seeking information in Brooklyn about "the travail of my birth," he finally entered "another cold trail," should probably not be connected too closely with the trail of the dead souls in "Northern Lights" "lured by/the ultimate coldness."

However, the ambivalence of *The Dead Kingdom* sharpens retrospectively on bald whetstones in Montague's next volume *Mount Eagle*, such as the assertion

4. *Irish Poetry After Joyce*, 85-90; "Eros in Eire," *Irish University Review* 19.1 (Spring 1989): 44-57.

5. I am grateful for Antoinette Quinn's and Terence Brown's instructive essays on this subject in the *Irish University Review* 19:1 (Spring 1989).

6. For example, in "The Locket," the line "The worst birth in the annals of Brooklyn" (*DK*, 89), even if an accurate recall of family lore, suggests autobiographical longing for a community with *annals* rather than a credible obstetrical or borough history.

in “Sheela na Gig” that we “spend our whole life/cruising to return. . . / . . . / . . . to that first darkness” (31). Perhaps because poetic forms in *Mount Eagle* are relaxed and experimental, the tone congenial, and the subjects often cheerful, Quinn balks at the mortuary implications of the title poem “Mount Eagle,” where Montague adapts an Amerindian location to what could be a County Cork seaside. With some of the pellucid gaiety of Mahon’s “An Image from Beckett,” the poem records the eagle’s last-day reconnoitre of his dancing harbor before he is absorbed into the mountain as a tutelary spirit. Quinn writes: “The role of *genius loci* here seems an expression of psychic petrification, a consummation devoutly to be resisted, not merely ambivalently entertained” (43). On the other hand, one might argue that what is most “open-eyed and laughing” and life-affirming in poems such as “Mount Eagle,” “Up So Doün,” “Hearth Song,” and “Sibylle’s Morning” is underwritten by and springs from musings on death, musings that transcend any single location.

Within *Mount Eagle*’s concluding sequence of poems—in which animal life disturbs the absorbing silence of American and Irish places—“The Hill of Silence” looms as a meditation on death. Recalling the relation of all traveling in Montague to maternal mysteries, we recognize a familiar guide on this little journey through an Irish landscape. When “lines appear to lead us/along the hillside/ /bog tufts softening,” we know from this last line’s cushioning assonance and spondee yielding to dactyl that we are led by a poet’s deliberate lines that strike an equilibrium, as Heaney says of Montague, between place and language (71). In spite of the auxiliary imperative “Let us” the poet yields his guidance to the stones as “one lich-/ened snout of stone/still leads one on,/ beckons to a final one.” As we climb past a perspective on historical scenes, we reach that place beyond history to which, we learned in “A Flowering Absence,” “all roads wind backwards.” The poet capitulates: “Let us lay ourselves/down in this silence.” Down upon his marrow bones—in this silence that eludes specific location—the poet defers to the Shelleyan larks, who stab “the sky/in an ecstasy of stitching fury/against the blue void.” If this poem serves a “conservative tradition,” as Dawe would argue of poems in *The Rough Field*, it contemplates—perhaps even as meditatively as Donne, O Rathaille, and Hopkins—that oldest of all conservatisms, of which Freud speaks: “All the organic instincts are conservative. . . . ‘The aim of all life is death’ and looking backwards. . . . ‘inanimate things existed before living ones’” (45-46). We might even say this is the home Montague approached by exploring his origins in America, not the state of New York, but as Freud would have it (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 45), “an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads.”

### Other Country

IN MONTAGUE’S story “The Death of a Chieftain,” the daft hero speculates about some spiral stone-carvings in Central America: “Certainly it was Brendan . . . Saint Brendan who discovered America. . . . If . . . [we] could prove that the Celts

not merely discovered but *founded* America . . . the two halves of the world would fit together . . ." (*Chieftain*). Although we have all dodged this man in a pub, he is a throwback to Enlightenment projectors such as Rowland Jones who believed that Celtic, "the first speech of mankind," offered clues to the ur-language spoken by Adam in naming the beasts (Essick, 78).

Well before he had touched down in America, Paul Muldoon had invented this other half of the world—as represented by Indians who have been settled on Alcatraz Island—and drawn it towards his own: they "have seemed forever going back/ . . . /As if this island/Has forever been the destination/Of all those dwindling bands" (*Mules and Early Poems*, 31).<sup>7</sup> In his most recent volume, *Madoc: A Mystery*, which is set almost entirely in America, Muldoon assumes, as part of his subject, this quest for racial and linguistic origins which preoccupied the Romantics but which arose in the previous century. Writing in 1691, Leibniz pondered:

Nearly all the languages of the world known to the ancients are interrelated to a large degree and appear to come from the same source. But when we pass to America . . . the languages seem to be so different among themselves and from ours that one would say it is another race of animals. (Aarsleff, 99)

As this statement . . . suggests, linguistic questions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—concerning the possibility of a natural language, the relation of words to things, and the sources of language—inevitably entailed anthropological, ontological, and theological questions that were galvanized by exploration and colonization of the New World.

In *Madoc: A Mystery*, Muldoon is neither merely resuming this old argument nor simply re-running his favorite topics: the other world, roads not taken, altered states of mind, and the effects of British colonialism, all of which have arisen within his American settings. In this long sequential poem, which fills most of the volume's 261 pages, he follows various strands of real and imagined frontier history between 1797 and 1843 (although the poem begins and ends in a futuristic institution called Unitel). Principally, we follow the efforts of S.T. Coleridge, Robert Southey, and their party to found on the Susquehanna a Utopian society, a pipe-dream Pantisocracy actually discussed and then abandoned in 1795 with a quarrel between the two poets. In *Madoc* their encounters with Seneca and Mohawk Indians are interspersed with "factual" accounts of the Burr-Blennerhasset conspiracy to invade Mexico which is opposed by President Jefferson who has his own plot, with Lewis & Clark, to acquire Louisiana and then expand to the Pacific. Behind this lies the ostensible "mystery" of the book's title, the disappearance into America of twelfth-century Welsh settlers and their prince, Madoc, and the possible survival of a Celtic strain within native populations such as the Mandans. Madoc's "discovery" of America and his return comprise the "historical facts" of Southey's poetic, and narcotic, tome of 1805.<sup>8</sup> As if this

7. Four of Muldoon's first five volumes close with long poems set partly or mostly in America.

8. With its fifty pages of notes and 395 pages (over 13,000 lines) of verse, it stands as, in Southey's phrase for a stately palace, a "prodigious pile" (*Thalaba*, I, 12, 6).

apparatus were not already a “much of a muchness,” to borrow a Muldoon phrase, each poem is headed by the name of a philosopher, arranged mostly chronologically from pre-Socratics to the present, to advance with the plot. Among the plot’s various disappearances, including the abduction of Sara Coleridge by the sinister Scots-Irishman Cinnamond and her progressive degradation, the clue *Croatan* emerges to recall a parallel disappearance of English settlers from Roanoke Island. Similarly, the plot’s various conspiracies find their parallel in the “Satanic School,” a phrase devised by Southey as contumely and prolepsis against his past and future detractors—Byron, Thomas Moore, but probably also the Shelleys.<sup>9</sup>

Byron once wrote of Southey’s interminable narrative poems: “Master Southey’s poems are, in fact, what parallel lines might be—viz. prolonged *ad infinitum* without meeting anything half so absurd as themselves” (Madden, 157). We readers may stir uneasily and wonder if Master Muldoon’s plots of may-have-been and might-have-been will converge when we notice his disquieting references to extended parallels. Jefferson, whose trysts with his slave-mistress simulate those of “Satanic” Byron and earn him the title “Beelzebub” from a spying Smith, invents a polygraph so that words such as *love* can run concurrently, “parallel to the parallel/realm to which it is itself the only clue” (96). (Pascal, entertainer of vast interior and exterior worlds, presides over this lyric.) Later, when a “snaggle-toothed gopher/tries his paw at the polygraph” (163), we might parallel an earlier pun of Muldoon’s and ask if Paul put the *pol* in *polygraph*.<sup>10</sup> Twins, exact replicas, parallel events, and frequent divergences—Sara and then Coleridge from the Pantisocrats, Lewis from Clark, Burr from Blennerhassett—reenforce this sense of Muldoon’s incurable duplicity.

Yet he offers us “keys.” After her abduction, Sara Coleridge manages from her whereabouts to send back to her sister Edith Southey a letter with a seal “Toujours Gai,” the code *signifump*, and a small key on “a snig of hemp” (58). The seal may relate, improbably, Sara to the British emissary Merry; the code, through the tutelage of Kristeva, under whose name it later appears, suggests language originates within the body and the phallus rules speech, lessons Sara ingests with her degradation by the Indians; the key allows us to track her “progress” along the Indians’ trade routes west. Finally, the keys—one held by Southey, one last seen in a Mandan’s hands—keep separate orbits as the three redundancies in Muldoon’s final reference to them implies: “And those . . . keys . . . ?/And those . . . keys . . . ?/Again, exactly identical” (250).

9. In his preface to *A Vision of Judgment* (1821), which Muldoon quotes on p. 245, Southey attributed to the works of this unnamed group “lascivious parts” and “audacious impiety.” In a letter (11/11/18), Byron called Southey a “Son of a Bitch” who “on his return from Switzerland two years ago—said that Shelley and I ‘had formed a League of Incest and practiced our precepts’ . . .” Southey’s *Vision* was such a reaction against his earlier republicanism that it made an easy target which Byron, nevertheless, hit dead center in his own *Vision of Judgment* (1822).

10. A dozen years ago, Muldoon said in an interview, “It’s important to most societies to have the notion of something out there to which we belong, that our home is somewhere else. . . there’s another dimension, something around us and beyond us, which is our inheritance” (Haffenden, 141).



Less misleading keys to *Madoc* appear in the seven prefatory lyrics.<sup>11</sup> Two of these steer us toward what I believe are two major concerns of this work. The first entitled dauntingly “The Key” seems to offer two views of language: a Heaneyish “defense of that same old patch of turf” where the poet digs for diverging etymological roots; the eponymous Foley’s concern that the object and its sound be synchronous and verisimilar. The poet says Foley seems “content to ventriloquize the surf,” which would seem to relate him to body language—*signifump*—the literal meaning of *ventriloquize*, and to the openness of the sea. Yet, aside from oceanic associations—*Marina, ultramarine, surf*—Foley works in a bathysphere, as we all do in our consciousnesses, sealed off temporally and spatially from the “open sea.” Language either directs us toward its multiple pasts, if not its origins, or, more often in this poem, according to the necessary function of imagination, toward an anticipated future past: “These past six months I’ve sometimes run a little ahead of myself, but mostly I lag behind, my footfalls already pre-empted by their echoes” (4).

If we take this light about language back to *Madoc: A Mystery*, we recognize that, in looking for a key, we become atavists resuming the eighteenth-century debate between realists and nominalists over linguistic origins. Early in the debate, for example, Locke argued in anticipation of Saussure that names are attached arbitrarily to referents by “ignorant and illiterate people” rather than by an Adam or another poet gifted with divine insight, and, therefore, even if “the *real* Essences of Substances were discoverable,” we could not “reasonably think, that . . . general Names” expressed “those internal real Constitutions” (*Essay on Human Understanding*, III, 6, 25, quoted in Aarsleff, 57). Although we may know Robert Boyle only by Boyle’s Law concerning gas under pressure, he wrote extensively about language, basically confirming Locke’s distinctions. In a poem entitled “Boyle,” just as a Seneca warrior is about to dispatch Coleridge, “internal real Constitutions” find their natural language:

Just as he’s about to vent  
his spleen  
  
his bedraggled pony breaks wind  
so vehemently  
it shakes the rafters  
of the metaphysical long-house.  
  
All collapse  
in helpless laughter.  
This horse-fart smells of newly-cut grass  
and, is it nutmeg? (97-98)

Although Coleridge is saved by this universal and natural expression—hardly what proponents of an Adamite language had in mind<sup>12</sup>—for all of its immediacy

11. In *The Astrakhan Cloak* (Wake Forest, 1993), Muldoon inserts the phrase “the acrostical capercaillie” into a translation of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s “The Lay of Loughadoon.” This seneschal poet thereby offers a key to a key in the poem “Capercaillie” in *Madoc*.

12. In the nineteenth century, philologists would turn to onomatopoeia and emotive expression as possible origins of language—what Max Müller called the “bow-wow” and “pooh-pooh” schools of philology (Essick, 18).

it carries for Coleridge a past dimension, as we will see later, through its Proustean hint of nutmeg.

In the next poem in *Madoc*, Muldoon continues his version of this debate to the southeast of Coleridge's encounter where Southey's first ideal village is being torched. Consistent with the epistemology of Locke, tutelary of this poem, Southey must wait for reports from his senses to inscribe his *tabula rasa*:

Not until he sees the great cloud-eddy  
renewing itself in a pond  
will Southey have even the faintest idea  
of what's happened.

Until he hears  
the sobbing of a resinous plank  
that's already been shaved of its ears  
his mind's a total blank. (99)<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Boyle's and Locke's view of language is undercut in the previous poem, so Lockean linguistics is first confirmed and then challenged here. Although we must wait until page 116 for our own senses to accumulate an understanding of this scene, the senses' first report—complicated by visual and linguistic reflexivity—is complex enough to confuse *idea* with *eddy*, even before nature speaks in the second stanza. Blake, who gave no ear to fallen nature, opposed Locke's empiricism and believed that in an Edenic state “aged trees utter an awful voice” and “roots . . . cry out in joys of existence” (*French Revolution* and *Four Zoas*, as quoted in Essick, 48).

The entire narration of *Madoc*, from the sixth page on, purports to communicate through just such a natural language, the sort Foley had espoused. The key-questing Robert South, descendant of Edith Southey and Cinnamon, has entered the futuristic Unitel to steal the Roanoke Rood. Rendered comatose by guards, he is wired into a retinagraph so that the result of his ancestor sleuthing can be transmitted directly and cinemagraphically: “So that . . . /all that follows/ flickers and flows/from the back of his right eyeball” (20).<sup>14</sup> So extensive is Muldoon's own historical sleuthing that I can only assume his Robert South is also descended from Locke's old schoolmate of the same name who preached in St. Paul's in 1662 that Adam could write “the nature of things upon their names; he could view essences in themselves, and read forms without the comment of their respective properties” (Aarsleff, 59).

As we advance in Muldoon's plot, of the factors that shape our response two require special consideration because they offer a modern response to questions of origination. First, unless during our reading we ignore the stream of philosophers' names at the pages' heads, we have skewed our view of each episode to find correspondence between thinker and action. Consequently, we necessarily

13. These quatrains pay tribute to Derek Mahon: the first to poems such as “A Garage in Co. Cork” or “Surrey Poems” and the second to “Nostalgias” and “Table Talk.”

14. As Guinn Batten observes, Muldoon “prefers fractured, multilineal narratives to the straight talk of a ‘Unitel!’” (13); Unitel's cerebral cinema offers the ultimate Adamite “straight talk.”

assume a philosophical relativity as we shift from idealists' premises to sceptics' to atomists' and so on. In time, we accept plot as premise: that we are driven forward through events by horseback, the poet's iambs, and the suspense of not knowing—*de dum*—with the expectation of either meaningful—*Te Deum*—or meaningless—*tedium*—closure.<sup>15</sup>

Questions of origination distract us from a history that advances, at least in *Madoc*, by division, which complicates plot, or assimilation, which usually simplifies and resolves. In this plot groups often divide, but, aside from the departures and reunions of Lewis & Clark and some aborted duels, assimilations are usually false, frustrated, or untraceable.<sup>16</sup> For purposes of revenge on Cinnamond for his abduction of Sara, Southey departs from and rejoins the Pantisocrats, but he pays the price of Cinnamond's own revenge: his castration of Burnett, burning of Southey's compound, and rape of Edith Southey. Otherwise, Southey and Coleridge separate by page 49 and experience in America the same decline from idealism—Southey into autocracy, Coleridge into drug addiction—they actually underwent in England, both dying on their actual death dates.

Significant reunions, such as that of Coleridge with Southey on pp. 225-30, occur only in visions and through the intermediacy of familiars or psychopomps: sometimes by a white spaniel, or the stallion Bucephalus from his mausoleum (220); "Betimes a cormorant, betimes a white coyote" (224). As always in his poetry, Muldoon is the ultimate go-between who calls attention to language as mediation and disruption.<sup>17</sup>

Appropriately, the second factor—beyond philosophical relativism—that shapes our response to *Madoc*, and clearly the most powerful, is the extraordinary range and precision of Muldoon's language. For just one example, within a dozen pages we encounter: *squantum*, *quannets*, *grallock-grummle*, *pirogue*, and *remuda*, all employed in their contexts as *mots justes*. A New World language, this vocabulary derives from many languages, emphasizes objects, and, in its unfamiliarity, masks, as it discloses, "barbarous" behavior. For example, in the time it takes for this bit of nastiness to clarify—"As to holding forth/on the inherent worth/of the earth,//he would surely be on the brink/of speech—were it not for the brank/of his own prong" (101)—negotiations can transpire. In Muldoon's America, negotiations remain on the level of barter (e.g., a Spokane chief who wishes to "dicker" for a Sheffield knife offers his wife [184]). In its suitability to barter, Muldoon's artifact-specific language opposes generalizations and, as Jean-Joseph Goux would argue of all utopian language, undercuts hierarchies of various sorts: economic, political, and familial (163-

15. For example, observe uses of *de dum* on pp. 71, 166, and 197.

16. According to Lévi-Strauss, twins often represent a threatening division in Indian societies so that one is preferred and the paternity of the second is assigned to the Trickster (202). Midway through *Madoc*, we witness two unproductive assimilations: Coleridge accepts Sara's loss; a Senecan dismantles a statue of the Good Twin, "though not before sawing off the narrow plank/on which he stands: 'assimilation'" (164). Also notice the competitive synthesis that occurs in the mock-pastoral on pp. 143-44.

17. See my argument in "The Go-Between In Recent Irish Poetry" in Kenneally, 172-85.

67). Consequently, object-centered and resistant to generalization, this language serves that free-trading in furs, flesh, and territory which occupies much of *Madoc*'s plot.

Just as the volume's opening poem "The Key" can lead us to questions of language, so the second prefatory poem "Tea" can focus a second major concern of *Madoc* which we are already approaching:

I was rooting through tea-chest after tea-chest  
as they drifted in along Key West

when I chanced on "Pythagoras in America":  
the book had fallen open at a book-mark

of tea; a tassel  
of black watered silk from a Missal;

a tea-bird's black tail-feather.  
All I have in the house is some left-over

squid cooked in its own ink  
and this unfortunate cup of tea. Take it. Drink.

Although the poem addresses the poetic process—a eucharistic offering, the suggestion that he inscribes from his own innards, his unwillingness to foretell—and offers itself, among the "Keys," as prologue to this volume, it first directs us, through jetsam from the Boston Tea Party and a second improbable landing, to themes of colonialism. The title "Pythagoras in America," which suggests another hypothetical pre-Columbian colony, also refers to Lévi-Strauss's essay concerning a mysterious proscription against and prescription for fava beans among Pythagoreans. Noting that Pythagoras "forbade fava beans because they served as a dwelling place for the souls of the dead" (193), Lévi-Strauss enquires further to discover why their consumption could also be recommended. He concludes morphologically that their ambiguous position between male and female forms "predisposes them . . . as intermediaries either for opening communication between the two worlds [this and the other] or for interrupting it" (198). That explanation of the title would direct us toward Muldoon's concern for the other world but hardly toward colonialism.

This title "Pythagoras in America" may also be a means for Muldoon to offer a green card and employment to another manifestation of Pythagoras, the same who appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to preach to the Romans, smug in their Augustan Empire, a morality subversive to their imperialism.<sup>18</sup> Pythagoras' proscription against beans Ovid translates to meat:

18. An acute and informed discussion by John Kerrigan of Mahon's interest in Ovid's Pythagoras led me to this idea. See "Ulster Ovids" in Corcoran, 237-69, especially p. 251. Muldoon has expressed an avid interest in translating Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Oh, what a wicked thing it is for flesh  
 To be the tomb of flesh, for the body's craving  
 To fatten on the body of another,  
 For one live creature to continue living  
 Through one live creature's death. . . . (XV, 89-93)

His argument progresses: "Our souls/Are deathless; always, when they leave our bodies,/They find new dwelling-places" (162-64).

By these words we could easily indict Cinnamond who invests himself in the skin of humans he has killed. This Scots-Irishman, as metamorphic as Hermes or the Trickster, is the most active middleman in the *Madoc* economy. However, nearly all the *Madoc* line-up have imprisoned others' souls. If *Meeting the British* directs itself against British colonialism, *Madoc* suggests that in a "free-market" society, even on the level of barter, almost everyone attempts to colonize someone else. Where United Irishmen MacGuffin and Blennerhasset plot to colonize Mexico, a Mohawk chief owns slaves, Indians buy and sell white concubines, and Pantisocrats become tyrants, perhaps only the women—one degraded, one as simple-minded as Kurtz's Intended—remain innocent. For that matter, *Madoc* may prove as thorough an indictment of the colonizer—who turns relative power into absolute rule—as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

With no allusions to Ovid in *Madoc* and no citations from Pythagoras' Ovidian speech, what is to direct us, we may ask, to this anti-imperialist sentiment? Beyond the key reference to Pythagoras in "Tea," we recall that the various spellings of the word "Croatan," which is introduced in the "Pythagoras" poem (19) as a transferred motto and which also arises above Blennerhasset's "New Atlantis," all collapse into *Crotona* at the end of our history. The Pantisocrats construct a banner proclaiming *Crotona*: "Not 'CROATAN', not 'CROATOAN', but 'CROTONA'" (258). *Crotona* refers to Pythagoras' Utopian colony in Italy and, more to our point, the site of his anti-imperialist speech in Ovid. We see this spelling only through the smoke and fire of Southeyopolis' destruction which must give it the prophylactic power of "East L. A." last May Day as a banner to live under. Earlier in the plot, Southey says of Plotinus' plan for a Platonic utopia: "The design would certainly have proved impracticable in that declining and degenerate age—most probably in any age—yet I cannot help wishing the experiment had been tried" (158).

*Crotona* may direct us not to a model for a utopia but rather to a mode of thought for undermining empires which is, after all, an intention of both utopian and anti-utopian literature. We may wish for less "mystery" and more positive models in *Madoc*,<sup>19</sup> one admirable character or event or even the rhetorical lift of this speech by the Ovidian Pythagoras on the endless recirculation of soul in a fluent universe:

19. Whereas Joyce believed that proper attention to *Finnegans Wake* would have slowed the advance of panzer divisions into Poland and brought WWII to a grinding halt, I doubt that Muldoon believes his complex work will reduce mad-dog bombers of Belfast into *Madoc* sleuths or joy-riders of Finglas into brow-furrowed antiquarians and etymologists. Nevertheless, I must report feeling, on my second or third reading of *Madoc*, a barely controllable urge to smash, a feeling never evoked in me by the *Wake*.

Full sail, I voyage  
 Over the boundless ocean, and I tell you  
 Nothing is permanent in all the world.  
 All things are fluent; every image forms,  
 Wandering through change. Time is itself a river  
 In constant movement, and the hours flow by  
 Like water, wave on wave, pursue, pursuing,  
 Forever fugitive, forever new. (177-84)

That belief, inimical to empire, if not to free trade, conservationist but not conservative, seems built into the fluent rhythm, precise but metamorphic language, and musical allegros of Muldoon's dystopia.

Finally, this detailed evocation of place frees Muldoon from place. We would sooner classify, say, *Waiting for Godot* as an Irish play than return *Madoc* to the shelf with Kavanagh or Yeats. If Montague has discovered in "America" a restorative autobiographical space, a cave of being, to which he cannot return, Muldoon has invented an equally enabling place in a work that could be transformative in the spirit of Pythagoras' next lines:

That which has been, is not; that which was not,  
 Begins to be. (186-87)

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ON HEARING MY DAUGHTER PLAY "THE SWAN"  
[from "The Carnival of the Animals" by Saint-Saëns]

My daughter plays Saint-Saëns. It is evening  
and spring. Suddenly I am outside  
a half-opened door. I am six years old  
but I already know there's a kind  
of music that can destroy.

My mother is playing a waltz, Chopin,  
and everything is possible. There are lilacs  
in a vase on the hall-table, white among  
the colourful umbrellas, folded,  
full of the morning's light rain.

My sisters' voices are calling one another  
far down the street. There are wind-blown leaves  
under my father's feet as he enters the room.  
I look at him as if for the first time  
and he grows older.

I see my mother rise from the piano  
and close it gently. She takes a glass  
from the table. It is empty. But she has put  
a weight in me, the weight of something  
that has died in her.

As my daughter sustains the melody  
with her right hand, the tumult  
of the chords she uses with her left hand  
brings into the room  
the hush and roar of the sea.

Joan McBreen