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Adam Crothers*

* Girton College, University of Cambridge

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The fifth of William Empson’s seven types of ambiguity ‘occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once’. [1] It is the kind of ambiguity that would seem inevitable to those who read poetry in a particular way. In his book *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (1980), Charles O. Hartman suggests the term ‘discovered form’ as a stand-in for the most useful implications of the oft-abused term ‘organic form’; discovered form, ‘a way of thinking’ rather than a form in itself, ‘presents form not as product but as process, not as structure but as operation’. [2] Both writer and reader, caught up in the moment-by-moment translation from permanent, objective text to temporary, subjective poem and back again, are unable to grasp the entirety of the experience, the ‘idea’, and are thus prone to ambiguities. I want to consider how this process works in a recent poem by Paul Muldoon, a poem that has Empson’s fifth type of ambiguity, particularly one manifestation of it, in mind.

That poem is from *Horse Latitudes* (2006), is called ‘The Treaty’, and looks like this:

My grandfather Frank Regan, cross-shanked, his shoulders in a moult,
steadies the buff
of his underparts against the ledge of the chimney bluff
of the mud-walled house in Cullenramer

in which, earlier, he had broken open a bolt
of the sky-stuff
and held it to the failing light, having himself failed to balance Gormley’s

cuffs.

‘This Collins,’ Gormley had wagged, ‘is a right flimflammer.’

Cross-shanked against the chimney bluff, he’s sizing up what follows
from our being on the verge
of nation-

hood when another broad-lapelled, swallow-tailed swallow
comes at a clip through the dusk-blue serge
to make some last-minute alterations.[\[3\]](#)

The presence of Muldoon’s grandfather, and the reference to Michael ‘Collins’, suggests that this is a poem about the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, whose formulation and ratification inspired feelings mixed enough to lead to the Irish Civil War of 1922-23. That the ‘last-minute alterations’ are only one letter away from ‘last-minute altercations’ is a (not especially good) play on words with which the poet (sensibly) does not choose to engage, but the ‘c’ might still be seen in the (‘failing’) light of what has gone before in the poem and what, implicitly, will follow. This might be reading too much into the text, but then even to declare that the treaty is the Anglo-Irish one, or that the Collins is Michael, or that Muldoon (whose mother’s maiden name was Regan) is indeed representing his actual grandfather, is presumptuous. The question of how much one ought to consider ‘external’, ‘private’, ‘idiosyncratic’[\[4\]](#) information in discussing a poem is not one that is going to be answered to everybody’s satisfaction any time soon, certainly not in this paper. But I would recall Empson’s observation, writing about an allusion in some lines of Marvell, that ‘such of the myth as is wanted is implied’:[\[5\]](#) ‘My grandfather Frank Regan’ and ‘This Collins’ should contribute something to the poem with or without factual detail regarding their identities. Every reader brings external information to a reading, inevitably and necessarily, and the poem could not function without this, but at the same time if the poem is to be other than a codified or prettified rehearsal of otherwise paraphraseable events something – not everything, but something – must be understood as

happening not in what the poem gestures towards, but in the very gestures it makes. Many do of course take this as read, but even were poetic experience universally understood to be at least the equal of textual content, the observation would be worth repeating, and it is with this in mind that I turn to discussing some of the formal qualities of 'The Treaty'.

The poem, at least by virtue of being fourteen lines long, is a sonnet. Its rhyme scheme, *abbc abbc def def*, does not quite follow the Petrarchan model according to which a *rima baciata* octave, *abbaabba*, would be expected. But the parallels between lines that Muldoon's rhyme scheme establishes remain tidy. In the two quatrains, the first lines are linked across stanzas by rhyme, as are the second, third and fourth, the middle two lines of both stanzas also rhyming with one another; the tercets imitate this pattern, first line (the poem's ninth) rhyming with first line (the poem's twelfth), and so on. Closure of sound appears, relative to many of Muldoon's poems, easily attained. This is owing not only to the neat patterning of the rhymes but to their perfection: the presence or absence of a plural 's' means that some of these rhymes are technically half rhymes, but the variation is standard enough scarcely to feel like a variation at all. Rhyme is a structural and generative force, both signalling the ends of the syllabically irregular lines and necessitating the search for vocabulary that will end those lines.

But the kind of closure afforded by the rhyme (and by the expectations, if one has any, regarding the sonnet form) is at odds with the closure of the poem's paraphraseable content. Indeed, Muldoon will rarely make more than one variety of closure easily attained, and as form and content cannot be wholly independent ideas, both varieties of closure are seen to be elusive and deceptive, and equally intertwined, creatures. The neatness of the rhyming in 'The Treaty' implies a narrative or argumentative neatness; but as it does so, the chiming closeness and close chiming of the rhyme units (arguably demanding less patience and imagination than half rhymes from the same collection, such as *duckweed/tact* or *alcoholic/Glock*)[6] make the text a fast-paced one, the predominately enjambed

lines, with their high proportion of hyphenated words, stretching and contracting rapidly, stumbling over themselves when pulled up short at the shorter lines that seem to hurry the poem along even as they demand more time and attention. Whether or not one is versed in Irish history or thinks the poem is indeed about Irish history, the sound of the poem keeps sense out of the reader's grasp, feigning the suggestion that much of the language can, and should, be taken for granted. And there is a lot to be taken for granted: the nearness of the name 'Frank', implying frankness, plainspokenness, to the less honest 'bluff'; the temporal gap apparent in the absence of the perfect tense (among perfect rhymes) between the present 'steadies' and the pluperfect 'he had broken'; the 'bolt | of the sky-stuff'; the reimagining of the military cry 'Steady, The Buffs!'; various implications surrounding 'buff' that the *OED* details (buff leather seeming the most relevant, but also a blow in combat, an expert in a particular subject, nudity, 'standing buff' in the sense of enduring, 'foolish talk'); the paralleling of 'stead[y]ing the buff' and 'balancing Gormley's cuffs'; the identities of Gormley and Collins ('This Collins', as if it were obvious it could be no other Collins); that swallow. There is much sense to be made out of these sounds; too much, perhaps. Don Paterson says that Muldoon's 'great project [...] is to prove that everything is everything else by demonstrating the interchangeability of all terms'.^[7] However much one might consider 'great' a comment on the project's value as well as its scale, a poem like 'The Treaty' begs the question of what exactly is achieved by proving such a thing. If everything is shown to be everything else, what progress is made? What makes this project, across a career or in an individual poem, worthy of anybody's attention?

In an earlier poem, 'Pomegranates and Pineapples', Muldoon talks of the pineapple as a symbol standing 'for something other than itself alone',^[8] but goes on to demonstrate that one word or symbol might have contradictory associations that are not easily resolved. 'The Treaty' arguably works as a response to the overloading of association, speculating that another way of proving that 'everything is everything else' is to show that everything is at the same time 'itself

alone'. This might sound hopelessly roundabout, and others have found as much: another poem in *Horse Latitudes* is entitled 'It Is What It Is', and in that title Peter McDonald senses 'a certain bristling defensiveness', suggesting that in this collection 'a Muldoon poem has little new to say'.^[9] But this is where Empson's fifth type of ambiguity is helpful. Tim Kendall has noted^[10] a fascination, in Muldoon's first collection *New Weather*, with the 'self-inwoven simile' that Empson identifies as a recurrence in Shelley's poetry; the poet, Empson writes, 'when not being able to think of a comparison fast enough [...] compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points out that it is its own nature, or that it sustains itself by supporting itself.'^[11] He suggests that Shelley 'seldom perceived profitable relations between two things, he was too helplessly excited by one thing at a time'.^[12] Perhaps some version of this can be applied to the Muldoon of 'The Treaty', still fascinated by the self-inwoven simile: helplessly excited by the relations between many things, he wonders to what extent perceiving one thing at a time might be profitable. The poem is the poet's fervent negotiation with himself. It is a draft of a treaty in its own right.

The plural word 'cuffs' seems not entirely 'balance[d]' against the *buff/bluff/stuff* sequence of rhyme units preceding it. The slight imbalance of the 's' changing perfect rhyme to half rhyme is of great importance to this poem, as is seen when pressure is applied to *follows/swallow* and *nation-/alterations*. The splitting of 'nationhood' across two lines is clever because this might look like a last-minute alteration in service to the rhyme, and because any declaration of nationhood, any declaration of unity, necessarily involves separatism and disunity; the rhyme with 'alterations' insists that the plural 'nations' be held in the mind along with the singular 'nation' and 'nationhood'; also, the word becomes hyphenated and the hyphen stands for a border, 'the verge | of nation- | hood', the verge as a dividing rather than inviting boundary, dividing both the word and that for which the word stands; a 'hood' appears as a typographically independent word, matching the poem's cuffs and lapels. Meanwhile, the rhyme *follows/swallow* is notable for having swallowed two additional swallows. First, 'follows' contains what

Muldoon would call a ‘near version’^[13] of ‘swallow’ inside itself, as seen when reversed to make ‘*swollof*’; second, the expected plural ‘swallows’ is nearly a palindrome, ‘swollaws’. And this swallow is itself ‘swallow-tailed’. This wallowing in the swamp of wordplay is leading somewhere. Frank Regan’s shoulders are ‘in a moult’: the *OED* gives ‘in the moult’ meaning ‘in a melancholy or sorry state’, although the implication is also that he is adorned in a moult, a shedding, of swallow feathers. The ‘bolt | of the sky-stuff’ might imply a bolt of lightning, but then this is also a bolt from the blue, the blue of the dusk that is a reference point for ‘the dusk-blue serge’; and stuff, like serge, is a variety of fabric. The swallow, a bird that might equally be the ‘stuff’ of the sky, flies through the dusk-blue serge, yes, but equally, as this poem takes place in ‘failing light’ and thus a particular dusk provides the comparison point, through the serge-blue dusk (or the dusk-blue-serge-blue dusk). It does so ‘at a clip’, or perhaps clipping a passageway for itself. Since ‘nation- | hood’ is also a *nationhood* formed of this fabric, the fabric, be it stuff or serge, becomes representative of the treaty, the treaty being clipped away at, the nationhood being broken across lines and stanzas. The treaty, the dusk, the swallow (with its lapels and its tail) and the grandfather (in his moult, and with his buff and his balancing of cuffs) are all conflated. Everything is everything else, but the effect is achieved not by offering explicit comparisons but by defining things as what they are – ‘swallow-tailed swallow’ – and comparing things to themselves – ‘the dusk-blue serge’ and the serge-blue dusk. The ambiguities of vocabulary are part of this. ‘This Collins’ makes me at any rate think of the *Collins English Dictionary*, and if a dictionary explains a word in terms of its many possible meanings, defines a thing as what it is or what it might be, then no wonder it seems ‘a right flimflammer’, a deceiver, speaking so many truths that it might be accused of lying.

A poem shows a mind in the act of thinking, rather than representing a completed thought; ‘The Treaty’, and the effort required on the part of the reader to understand this poem while reading and re-reading the text, is, as I have suggested, a negotiation, an attempt to accommodate different viewpoints by

compressing them into one, tackling multiplicity through convergence rather than the divergence that is involved in, for instance, some of Muldoon's sprawling longer poems. It is a treaty, born of disagreement and saturated in compromise, a compromise not complacent but hard-fought. As does the poem that McDonald singles out, 'The Treaty' argues that saying 'it is what it is' need not be a cop-out or retreat, and that the self-inwoven simile, the 'short-circuited comparison', has its own way of being profitable. 'The Treaty' might be linked to 'Turtles', which immediately follows 'It Is What It Is' and presents a poet who 'can't be sure of what is and what is not',^[14] suggesting that confirming *that* something is poses a more pressing challenge than confirming *what* it is. Discussing something in its own terms is of considerable value. Of course, the impact of such an argument depends upon its presentation, and 'The Treaty' succeeds because it requires a formalist reading, one that links the shape of the text to the shapes of the poem, in order for this argument to exist at all. It might be countered that a self-fulfilling poem equals a self-satisfied, self-important poem, and I would agree that to approach a poem solely on its own terms is ill-advised, as any poem would thus become, godlike, 'its own justification',^[15] eradicating the possibility of value judgements. What keeps a poem like 'The Treaty' from smugly swallowing its own tall tale is the enactment of its philosophical position via, rather than the dressing of its treatise in, rhythm and rhyme. The form is not in service to the paraphraseable content, does not emphasise or decorate an argument that was there without the formal intervention; one might also observe that this intervention does not eclipse the textual subject matter, but rather complements it, and relies upon it. Whether because I thought the poem sounded good, or because it was a good story, or because these did not seem good enough, I wanted to understand what combination of sounds and senses made up the sense, the impression, that this was a successful poem; hence the reading that I offer here. And although Empson, and other Muldoon poems, have been featured in this discussion in the hope of presenting something other (which need not be taken to mean 'more' or 'better') than a close-reading exercise, and although I did not have every possible meaning of every word stored in my mind while reading 'The

Treaty’, it should be apparent that the puns and near-palindromes, the subversions and diversions, are dormant in the text that Muldoon presents, and are swiftly disturbed.

In his chapter, Empson quotes part of Shelley’s ‘Ode to a Skylark’ that is relevant here, and which I quote from a typographically different (but for the purposes of this discussion, negligibly so) edition of Shelley’s poems:

Like a star of Heaven,
 In the broad daylight
 Thou art unseen, – but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

V.

Keen as are the arrows
 Of that silver sphere,
 Whose intense light narrows
 In the white dawn clear,
 Until we hardly see – we feel that it is there:[\[16\]](#)

Shelley’s skylark and Muldoon’s swallow, if not quite birds of a feather, have a similar flight path, in that both make sounds that reveal otherwise inaccessible meanings, whether in the ‘failing light’ of the evening or the moon’s ‘narrow[ing]’ morning light. Among its entries for ‘buff’ the *OED* gives ‘*shadow buff*: a modern game in which one player has to guess the identity of the other players from seeing only their shadows’. Plato’s allegory of the cave, and the shadows on the wall that provide a limited version of reality to the cave-dwellers, comes to mind, but somewhat recast. If, in Plato’s version, philosophy endeavours to step outside the cave and gain comprehension of what casts the shadows (and then finds it difficult to return from the light to the darkness), one might imagine, as Muldoon seems to, a version wherein poetry keeps the shadows, the tricks of the light, their parallels and equivalences, ever within sight as it moves back and forth. Another *Horse Latitudes* poem, ‘The Landing’, features a squid, ‘easily mistaken’ for ‘an amphibious vehicle’, that ‘shines a

beam on the seabed to cancel its own shadow'.^[17] But despite such a last-minute alteration, the poet's 'mistakes' have already been made, the shadow and the shades of meaning have already been spotted, and the poem has already happened. The shadows and the things that cast them, or perhaps the things that they cast, come to be discussed on the same terms: they are what they are, and to say as much is by no means a shying away from constructive and instructive ambiguities.

Endnotes

[1] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (London: Pimlico, 2004) 155.

[2] Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980) 86.

[3] Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 32.

[4] W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954) 10. The essay quoted, 'The Intentional Fallacy', was written in collaboration with Monroe Beardsley.

[5] Empson, 167.

[6] *Horse Latitudes*, 26, 95.

[7] *101 Sonnets*, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber 2002), ed. by Don Paterson, 115.

[8] Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber and Faber 2002) 25.

[9] Peter McDonald, review of Paul Muldoon's *Horse Latitudes*, *Poetry Review*, 97.1 (2007) 88-90 (90).

[10] Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1996) 32.

[11] Empson, 160-61.

[12] *Ibid.* 161.

[13] Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 41.

[14] *Horse Latitudes*, 50.

[15] Empson, 161.

[16] *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by C.D. Locock, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1911), II, 216.

[17] *Horse Latitudes*, 86.

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First Response

This lucid and suggestive essay on Muldoon's characteristically tricky 'The Treaty' uses to advantage Charles O. Hartman's notion of 'discovered form', form, that is, which is concerned with process rather than product. It sees the poem as embodying the fifth of William Empson's seven types of ambiguity, a type which 'occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once'. Making a brief but thought-provoking link with Shelleyan poetics, the essay helpfully explores the formal properties of Muldoon's sonnet, and reminds us that 'A poem shows a mind in the act of thinking, rather than representing a completed thought'.