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## **Sounding Difference: Paul Muldoon's "The Lass of Aughrim"<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

In the present paper, I focus on a single short poem "The Lass of Aughrim" by Paul Muldoon with a view to showing that it invites the reader to participate in the process of approaching in language the foreignness of another culture. The persona depicts a situation in which an ethical choice is vested in the act of speaking, which either acknowledges the irreducible otherness implicit in the poem or imposes an essentially colonial point of view. The ethical dimension as it is probed here is derived from some insights of Jacques Derrida, especially his lectures delivered in the 1990s.

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Among the hallmarks of Paul Muldoon's poetry is its allusiveness, which has become more extreme in the volumes after *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990), and its fragmentary structure. Reading a Muldoon poem we are typically plunged into a moment of what quickly appears to be a part of a larger narrative, the exact plot of which is never fully revealed. Those narratives take us to the countryside (like in the unnerving "Ned Skinner") and cities (notably New York in "7, Middagh Street" but also numerous unnamed, though often suggestive of film-noire qualities, cities like in "Imram"); we witness (occasionally eavesdrop on) public events (a recent example is the amazing "Plan B") as well as private, frequently intimate, situations (examples are numerous but among the most prominent undoubtedly we find "Incantata"), in which we nearly spy on the speaker (family breakfast in "Cuba") or on the contrary, we are addressed as though by a friend ("Boundary Commission"). What is, however, an equally characteristic quality of these lyrics is their profoundly ethical dimension in that what seems to play a crucial role in all these various poems is the attempt to explore the relationship with another person. This reaching out to the other underlies numerous poems, most explicitly it is done in Muldoon's unparalleled elegiac verse, where he endeavours to recreate the deceased person through revisiting their idiosyncrasies, thus turning pastiche into a powerful ruse against death understood as sudden silencing. Here, however, I will investigate the reaching out to the other in a single short poem "The Lass

of Aughrim,” where the persona depicts a situation in which an ethical choice is vested in the act of speaking that either acknowledges the irreducible otherness in what seems familiar or enforces one’s own point of view onto the other. The ethical dimension as it is probed here is derived from some insights of Jacques Derrida, especially his lectures delivered in the 1990s.

“The Lass of Aughrim” was first included in *Meeting the British* (1987), a volume consistently thematising the confluence of civilisations. Jefferson Holdridge ascribes Muldoon’s interest in moments when people of different nationalities meet to his emigration to the USA in 1987 and insists on an American influence on this “transnational volume” (Holdridge 84). However, the meetings that take place throughout the collection repeatedly place civilisations and peoples in a hierarchical relation of power. Already the opening prose poem, “Ontario,” ends by evoking a conversation between the speaker, suggestive of Muldoon himself, and a girl he meets in a club in Toronto, which he visits to see his brother; the conversation starts awkwardly when he “helped [the] girl [...] to find her contact-lens”: “– Did you know Spinoza was a lens-grinder? – Are you for real?” (Muldoon 1987, 2). Despite the rather inauspicious beginning, she turns out to have a curious fact for him too: “– Did you know that Yonge Street’s the longest street in the world? – I can’t say that I did. – Well, it starts a thousand miles to the north, and ends right here” (Muldoon 1987, 3). While at first the speaker appears to be a geeky know-it-all, who must strike an incongruous figure in a nightclub, his query regarding Spinoza also adumbrates a superiority of education that he, perhaps unwittingly, boasts. In this light, the glib ending of “Ontario” shows its ironic nature, for the girl’s own response appears to be not only as glib as the speaker’s but also it checks his implication of punditry. His bookishness, though embarrassingly endearing at first, is counterbalanced by her, implicitly proud, revelation of a fact of similarly interesting proportions. Also, most likely an Irishman, the speaker, Stephen Dedalus-like, is possessed of information regarding a hero of the Netherlands (itself a naval power in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), whereas the girl offers a fact that emphasises the uniqueness of her indigenous culture. Finally, Spinoza was himself a Jew and so the Dutch context itself blurs, leaving shades of cultural affiliations and shifting the balance of power, which never really tilts to any side in the poem.

The confluence of civilisations is treated with no less skill but more resolve on who gains the upper-hand in “Meeting the British.” The poem records an episode from the French and Indian war, when General Jeffrey Amherst and Colonel Henry Bouquet met the representatives of the Native Americans to parley and exchange gifts. While the British got willow-tobacco, the Indians were presented with “six fishhooks / and two blankets embroidered with smallpox” (Muldoon 1987, 16). Therefore what started as a promise of peace, suggested in the poem by the hopeful “sound of two streams coming together / (both were frozen over)” (Muldoon 1987, 16), led to an outbreak of an epidemic that decimated the Indian

population, what Carl Waldman called "an early example of biological warfare" (Waldman 108). Again, the meeting that betokens an achievement of a balance of power results in a sudden break-up of the balance as a result of a cunning stratagem; the Native of the land is shown the full scale of the European (destructive) intellectual potential. Poem after poem in *Meeting the British* enacts such unexpected interruptions of balance; it is of little consequence whether this balance is cultural, political or military, Muldoon consistently challenges the possibility of two peoples' enjoying a sustained mutually-beneficial relationship. Still, this impossibility of maintaining a transcultural conversation is offset by an inquiry into "how to articulate change, how to capture process rather than burial, dying rather than death" (Wills 125). Those many-angled conflicts come together in "The Lass of Aughrim" but it is in this poem that Muldoon manages to include the reader in an underlying colonial struggle. No longer do we watch and unravel the layers of imbalance from a removed vantage of our privileged comfort zones, for in the poem the responsibility for maintaining the balance is given to the reader.

The opening stanza puts us in the well-known Muldoonian region of *in medias res*, as the speaker begins to narrate an episode that he is seeing "On a tributary of the Amazon": "an Indian boy / steps out of the forest / and strikes up on a flute" (Muldoon 1987, 15). The choice of the simple present tense carries an implication of immediacy of the experience and its simultaneity with the act of speaking. This is a familiar device whereby Muldoon insists that the past event is enshrined in the eternal present of the moment of utterance. The encounter of the boy implies a mythical importance that is, at the same time, checked by the immediacy of the episode, its apparent insignificance. What may be a little surprising is the fact the boy should be using a flute, a distinctly European invention, rather than a pipe, a more primitive instrument. This minor surprise is developed in the following stanza:

Imagine my delight  
when we cut the outboard motor  
and I recognize the strains  
of *The Lass of Aughrim*. (Muldoon 1987, 15)

There is no mistaking the fact that the speaker, who can now be identified as an Irishman, is elated at hearing his native song in the depths of the jungle. Moreover, the ballad is a loaded song in Irish literary and cultural history and thus invites us to pause at its mention in this most unusual place.

Although the speaker's initial emotional response is "delight," the ballad is apt to evoke a congeries of feelings. One will remember that it features prominently in Joyce's "The Dead," an indubitable intertext for Muldoon's poem (see Wills 114–115). Towards the end of the Christmas dinner at Aunt Kate and Julia's, Gabriel Conroy notices his wife, Gretta, "standing near the top of the first flight"

and realises that she is listening to something. At length it appears that one of the guests, the singer Bartell D'Arcy, despite his sore throat, has finally chosen to sing "the air with words expressing grief": "O, the rain falls on my heavy locks / And the dew wet my skin, / My babe lies cold [...]" (Joyce 2001, 151). Before leaving, D'Arcy explains to Gretta that the song was "The Lass of Aughrim," which, as we learn later, reminds Gretta of a boy she once knew back in Galway, Michael Furey, who used to sing that song. The song tells the story of a young woman who pleads with her lover, Lord Gregory, to take her and her baby into his castle but she does not know that the Lord's mother has designs on keeping them apart, which she eventually succeeds in doing. The ballad has been identified as *mise en abyme* of the story in that "the initial rejection of Gretta by Gabriel's mother is analogous to the situation in the ballad." Another layer of parallel is that

In Gretta's account of the Furey story she is being sent off to a convent and not allowed to see him. He comes anyway and is destroyed by the rain because he doesn't care to live once Gretta has gone away. If Gretta is in fact the Ireland symbol kept from her ardent lover by the strictures of the convent and church, as Gregory in the ballad is restrained by his mother, then Gabriel, the unfeeling establishment figure, is all that is left to her. Their marriage is to typify the whole sterility of the Dubliners in contrast with Gretta's suggestion that there was fertility in the liaison between her and Furey. (Bowen 22)

"The Lass of Aughrim" brings together the conflict between the native Irish strain, as represented by the young woman in the ballad and Gretta in Joyce's story, and the (imported) culture of the Big House, in the case of Lord Gregory's mother, and the church in "The Dead." As in the above-mentioned poems by Muldoon, the balance between the two elements in "The Dead" shifts in favour of the foreign, though its triumph comes at a Pyrrhic cost, as both the young woman in the ballad and Michael Furey in Joyce die, leaving the living emotionally barren. We may also remember that Muldoon probes into "The Dead" throughout his Clarendon lectures, published as *To Ireland, I*, in which he concludes at one point that "'The Dead' is indeed a story of 'public life,' in which Joyce undercuts the rhetoric of cultural nationalism, revelling in the very thing he repudiates, delighting in what he disdains. [...] Joyce knows that literature is never above politics, that they coexist [...]" (Muldoon 2001, 66). This point is then counterbalanced by the idea that intertextuality among Irish writers "is symptomatic of several deep-seated senses. The first of which is concomitancy. There's a sense of two discreet coexistent realms. Two texts. Concomitant with that, though, is the fact there's no distinction between one world and the next" (Muldoon 2001, 24). The intertwining of texts is informed by an intertwining of the visible world and the realm behind the veil, of which an Irish writer is constantly aware so that in Irish literature "what you *see* is *never* what you get" (Muldoon 2001, 6 original emphasis). Thus, the balancing of opposites, whether those are private and public, literary and political,

nativity and foreignness, is identified as the foundational aspect of the Irish poet, and Muldoon is at the helm of that tradition.

"The Lass of Aghrim," as it features in "The Dead," evokes the polarity between the living aspect of the native strain, which can also be associated with the essentially literary element of romance (the girl as damsel in distress, or a muse-like figure that the young man falls for and will not rest until he is united with her or spent), and the foreign, deeply political, and pragmatic line, which is shown to be barren. Joyce was adamant about the need to nurture the liveliest tradition, though he would not endorse Yeats's Celtic Revival, and that lively tradition was surely not to be found in submission to externally-imposed standards, whether English or Roman. As Joyce put it in one of his Trieste lectures: "I confess that I do not see what good it does to fulminate against the English tyranny while the Roman tyranny occupies the palace of the soul" (Joyce 1970, 173). This is an early elaboration of Stephen Dedalus's famous declaration of *non serviam*. Part of the appeal of "The Lass of Aghrim" to Joyce must have been its tragic failure to fulfil the promise of love, which surrenders to an externally imposed structure.

In Muldoon's poem, the speaker's "delight" is thus checked as the ballad seems to perform a similar function as it does in Joyce's story, bringing into focus the underlying story of conflict resultant from an imbalance between the native and the foreign. Moreover, whereas the ballad form in which Joyce's "The Lass of Aghrim" is written represents a tradition that, for example, Yeats recognised as characteristically Irish, Muldoon chooses to write a sonnet, which is clearly a foreign import. However, rather than the traditional formal arrangement, Muldoon's sonnet mutates until it only evokes the form. Thus, the scene depicted in the poem comprises mutations both on the formal level, as the sonnet pattern is reworked, and on the thematic level, as, on the one hand, the boy's cultural identity and daily habits are inflected by the priest and on the other the speaker as well as the boatman, introduced in the following stanza, communicate in a language that was imposed on them. In the last two stanzas, it is the boatman that comes to explain the situation to the speaker and, by proxy, to us:

"He hopes," Jesus explains,  
 "to charm  
 fish from the water

on what was the tibia  
 of a priest  
 from a long-abandoned mission." (Muldoon 1987, 15)

The final two stanzas set in motion multiple layers of conflict. Firstly, the priest, responsible for spreading Christianity, himself is no innocent figure. The process of conversion invokes a history of violence that Europe visited on South America, beginning with Hernan Cortez, himself a person of cunning no worse than that

of General Amherst and Colonel Bouquet. Even though Christian imperialism is less associated with South America than with Africa, for example, the sixteenth century saw an increased drive towards converting even the remote South American villages into Christianity. Until their expulsion in the eighteenth century, the Jesuits were the primary agents of faith, especially in the regions of Brazil and Paraguay, but Amazonia remained impervious to the new religion. It was rather individuals and communities that adopted the new faith and even then, this applied generally to the basic elements of the ritual like making the sign of the cross or kneeling before the altar (the latter of which was reported by Columbus as his successful attempt at conversion) (see Pollock 170–173). This seems to be the case with the boy as well in that he has learnt and put into practice the element of the priest's teaching that he believes is useful. Nevertheless, the fact that the native boy chooses that particular melody "to charm fish from the water" suggests that the priest, an Irishman no doubt, succeeded in inculcating that tune into him. In this sense, the priest's mission has been accomplished, for the native tunes are lost on the boy, instead he opts for the foreign one. The balance of the indigenous and the foreign tilts in favour of the latter, as the dead priest still holds power over the boy's auditory imagination.

However, before a conclusion is reached as to the context in which Muldoon's poem functions, it is important to observe that the seemingly imbalanced situation gestures towards a painful genealogical balance. When Amazonia was being conquered in the sixteenth century and came under European oppression throughout the seventeenth, Ireland faced the onslaught of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, who landed in Ireland with his new model army in 1649 in order to suppress the revolt of the Irish Catholic Confederation, which he did with extreme violence. Being an Irishman, the priest, most likely a Catholic, comes from a country that has itself been brutalised by a foreign invader and religion played, then as now, a vital part in the conflict. Therefore, the situations of the native boy in South America and that of the Catholic priest in Ireland, even if not fully comparable, are at least parallel.

This affinity between the priest and the boy is implied by the fact that rather than teach him psalms or common prayers, the priest had the boy learn to play the flute, hardly an instrument used during the mass and more to do with pagan cults of, say, Pan. This pre-Christian element implicit in the act of playing "The Lass of Aughrim" is further emphasised by the fact that after his death, the priest's bones serve as a vehicle for evoking the traditional Irish airs. There is an element of magic in this image of piping a classic Irish song that comes from the bones of a departed Irishman. Muldoon uses it again in "7, Middagh Street," in which the section entitled "Louis" (and ventriloquising Louis MacNeice) ends by evoking a late-night party "where a sailor played a melodeon / made from a merman's spine" (Muldoon 1987, 60). In "7, Middagh Street," the ending calls up a semi-mythical night, with "shebeens" and suspect seamen, in which one

can encounter "The one-eyed foreman [who] had strayed out of Homer" as well as a "Quinquerem of Nineveh from distant Ophir": all this a true Irish stew of "balladeers and bards," as Muldoon would call the Irish nonchalant, if occasionally inauspicious, band of poets. A part of this magical scene is to be caught in "The Lass of Aughrim" and so the priest's tibia becomes an artefact on a par with the "melodeon / made from a merman's spine." The significance of this artefact is further suggested by another set of bones. In "The Wishbone," an indirect elegy for Muldoon's mother, the speaker finds a rapport with his father, with whom he shares dinner that comprises "a frozen chicken, / spuds, sprouts, Paxo sage and onion;" after consuming the food, the speaker casts his keen eye on "The wishbone like a rowelled spur / on the fibula of Sir—or Sir—" (Muldoon 1987, 14). Holdridge regards this poem as offering redemption (Holdridge 87), though in the context of the entire collection truce, if not yet peace, would be equally appropriate. In "The Lass of Aughrim," the ballad-producing tibia creates a space wherein the native meets the foreign and realises that they share more than might at first glance have seemed.

The boy and the priest are thus brought closer together, both being representatives of cultures that were at one point annexed and nearly destroyed. The irony here is that the priest, arguably despite his best intentions and endeavours, might have replayed some of the suppression that he himself had been subject to. Knowing the air, the speaker becomes complicit, a concomitant element in the cultural enigma of nativity and foreignness, in the act of negotiating, or balancing, a space where disparate identities and languages can meet and enjoy impartial consort. This framework, however, is yet again challenged by the introduction of the only proper name in the poem: Jesus. At this point, as I would like to propose, Muldoon sets up a test for the reader, a test that is all the more effective for its seeming obviousness. So far the poem has been shown to propel and keep in motion various narratives, ranging from an evocation of the colonial context all the way to an intimate consideration for familial values. What all these readings imply is the fact that when cultures, or traditions, meet, there often follows a struggle for power, which frequently takes on a sly and dishonest form: the once oppressed become oppressors, the system backfires at the citizen. And yet the problematic figure of the deceased priest suggests that in spite of differences, there is always a platform for communication, whether it is the tibia, or the fibula. Part of such an unbiased and non-violent communication is the acceptance of the other as an independent figure, to whom nobody has access but whose individuality everybody must acknowledge. The crucial role here belongs to language, and more specifically to pronunciation.

The name Jesus is so culturally-loaded as to immediately compel attention in so short a poem. While one would naturally seek biblical allusions, it is the way one pronounces the name that makes all the difference. Given that the poem is written in a fully idiomatic language, a quick reading is likely to glide over the



word, adopting the standard English /'dʒi:zəs/. However, a more careful perusal would rather favour the Spanish /'xesus / or possibly Portuguese /ʒɛz'ʊʃ/. Obvious though the point may appear, it is an experiment in taking sides in a crucial postcolonial dispute. Adopting the English pronunciation places a foreign norm on the local standard; the logic that underpins the choice is similar in quality, if not intensity, to that of the conquistadors. If the poem was written in English, it is only natural that its standard ought to be conformed to by the Native and the reader alike. This is a trope of double invasion in that not only is the boatman's identity undermined, ostensibly at a most inauspicious moment, but also the reader is made party to the coloniser. As for the speaker, he is turned into a foreign tourist, delighted to see that his own culture, that of his motherland and, more expansively, that of the Catholic Church, has exerted an impact on the locals. On the other hand, if we have the speaker adopt the foreign standard, the poem opens itself, for a cursory moment, to a variety of cultural influences. Here, however, this openness, which might seem to offer a key to maintaining a balance between the native and the foreign, is shot through with numerous strings of colonisation. After all, Jesus remains the crucial name in a religion that has little to do with the native South American beliefs and whatever pronunciation is adopted, the colonial context remains.

What is critical here is not so much in which colonial narrative the boatman is framed but whether or not the speaker is able to admit a foreign element into his own language. The poem is dominated by English, although it is neither the mother tongue of the boy and the boatman nor the tongue currently used in the region. By admitting a foreign pronunciation, the speaker not so much erases the centuries of colonial exploitation, which is in itself impossible, as embraces a difference that lies at the foundation of the event: the boy plays a different tune to that of his native culture, the boatman speaks a language different to his own and now the speaker also pronounces the name differently to how he would do it at home. These differences necessarily point our attention to the Old Testament story of the Ephraimites whose identity depended on the ability to pronounce the word shibboleth (the problem being they had no /ʃ/ sound in their language). In his essay on Paul Celan, Derrida, whose task of shaking the traditionally accepted modes of conceptual knowledge parallel Muldoon's desire to destabilise ideas such as identity or nationhood, observes that each repetition always presupposes effacement, a difference:

It is necessary that the unrepeatable be repeated in [a date], effacing in itself the irreducible singularity which it denotes. It is necessary that in a certain manner it divide itself in repeating, and by the same stroke encipher or encrypt itself. [...] It must efface itself in order to become readable, to render itself the unique marking which connects it to an event without witness, without other witness, it remains intact, but absolutely indecipherable. (Derrida 1992, 389–90)

The date is always already deferred as it is summoned, it reveals and denies itself in effacement at the same time, thereby making its inscription (for example, after a poem) a signifier of perpetual postponement of the moment in the past. In "Sauf le nom," Derrida unfolds a similar argument to that in "Shibboleth," placing name, particularly the name of God, in the position of the moment of dating. He argues that "the name not only is nothing, in any case is not the 'thing' it names, not the 'nameable' or renowned, but also risks to bind, to enslave or to engage the other;" moreover, the name "no longer belongs from the very first moment to s/he who gives it" (Derrida 1995, 84). Thus, Derrida concludes, "the gift of the name gives that which it does not have, that in which, prior to everything, may consist the essence, that is to say – beyond being – the nonessence, of the gift" (Derrida 1995, 85). It may be noted that the name denotes an endless process of supplementation, of referral to always another name.

A little earlier in the same lecture, Derrida briefly addresses the issue of pronunciation of the name, "which comes down to traversing it toward the other, the other whom it names and who bears it. To pronounce it without pronouncing it. To forget it by calling it, by recalling it (to oneself), which comes down to calling or recalling the other" (Derrida 1995, 58). The idea of pronunciation as traversing the name to the other implies that the moment of iteration of the name is the moment of entering into a relation with the other. Furthermore, this call seems to function like an invitation extended to the other whom we know and with whom we want to cement our bond. Lévinas refers to that situation as "language": "the separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good. Such a situation is language [*discours*]" (Lévinas 62), for it is a space wherein we enter into contact with an infinitely different and separate person. However, this invitation by calling and recalling the name is fraught with ambiguity, which Derrida discusses in "Hostipitality," a lecture delivered four years after "Sauf le nom." Suggesting at the outset that "we don't know what hospitality is," he goes on to explore four variants of the structure of the notion. Among his intermediary conclusions there is the following analysis: "it is precisely the *patron* of the house, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains master in his house – who defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome; where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door" (Derrida 2000, 4). Even the act of calling somebody's name as invitation presupposes that there is a place that we own, that is carved out from the mutual space and apportioned to us, into which we may in this case, but may well not in another case, invite another person.

The nature of pronouncing Jesus's name in "The Lass of Aughrim" is informed by the paradoxical mechanism that Derrida unravels in "Sauf le nom" and "Hostipitality" in that the speaker, irrespective of how much he would like to make himself

appear innocuous, cannot erase the fact that he speaks on behalf of usurpers of the Amazon region. Even if he adopts the foreign pronunciation, a history of violence still undergirds his words. What matters therefore is not the challenge to the Western (Christian) hegemony in South America but the difference that is set up for a fleeting moment between the native and the foreign. Derrida tentatively concludes in “Hostipitality” that “hospitality can only take place beyond hospitality, in deciding to let it come, overcoming the hospitality that paralyzes itself on the threshold which it is” (Derrida 2000, 14). This point beyond hospitality seems to refer to the ongoing postponement of the invitation, which always carries the suggestion of a restricted space to which access may be granted, if granted it is, only temporarily; hospitable and hostile, as Derrida demonstrates, share a Latin root. Instead, Derrida seems to propose what in “Sauf le nom” he described as “traversing [the name] toward the other”: engaging with the other must come on unrestricted terms, for the restrictions imposed by language are enough to make the engagement an onerous process. Openness to the foreign is thus a key to alleviating a part of the ruthlessness that is intrinsic to the native.

If Muldoon’s speaker does open himself to the foreign sounding “Jesus,” he turns the culturally-loaded name into an act of acceptance of the other. If “Jesus” is anglicised, then the “delight” becomes just that: a delight at discovering an element of his indigenous culture in a most unlikely place, but also a place where it can only signify imposition, enforcement and subjugation of the native. The speaker stands before the law in the sense that he is both in front of it and prior to its arrival, as Derrida explained in “Devant la loi.” But Muldoon’s trickster-like shrewdness shifts the responsibility for this deeply ethical choice to the reader. It is at each reading, each iteration of the written word, that we must forever once more overcome the impasse of hospitality. Accepting the different language, along with the characters in the poem, all of whom speak English though it is not their mother tongue, the reader situates him or herself in the relation with the other, regardless of whether this other turns out to be the boy, the speaker or Jesus.

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