Magna Poeta, *Magnum Opus*: Paul Muldoon's "Cuthbert and the Otters" and Unending Heaney

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Abstract

In the article, I focus on Paul Muldoon's elegy for Seamus Heaney "Cuthbert and the Otters" (from *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*) with a view to demonstrating that the poem features two poetic voices. Whereas one of them engages the work of the recently-demised Nobel prize winner, the other, briefly invoking the funeral procession, cannot overcome the grief at Heaney's death. Throughout the article I trace the intertextual links that Muldoon implements throughout his poem and set them against the evocations of the funeral ceremony which focus directly on the speaker as the pallbearer. This dual summoning of the oeuvre and the fact of Heaney's demise reveals poetry to be on the one hand an attempt to postpone the acknowledgement of death by creatively reworking Heaney's oeuvre and on the other the realisation of the poet's physical death impervious to any poetic intervention.

Keywords: Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney, contemporary poetry, elegy, intertextuality

Abstrakt
Esej skupia się na elegii Paula Muldoona pamięci Seamusa Heaneya, *Cuthbert and the Otters* (z tomu *One Hundred Things Worth Knowing*). W elegii da się rozróżnić dwa głosy poetyckie, z których jeden prowadzi intertekstualną grę z twórczością irlandzkiego noblisty, drugi zaś, należący do członka konduktu pogrzebowego niosącego trumnę z ciałem Heaneya, stwierdza, że nie jest w stanie przezwyciężyć bólu po stracie przyjaciela. O ile więc głos odwołujący się do poezji Heaneya wydaje się próbą stawienia czoła śmierci, o tyle głos członka konduktu symbolizuje jej ostateczność, która kładzie kres poezji.

Słowa kluczowe: Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney, współczesna poezja, elegia, intertekstualność

When all of Ireland's literary world assembled in the Royal Hospital Kilmainhan to celebrate Seamus Heaney's winning the Noble Prize in 1995, there was no shortage of gushing speeches and occasional snide remarks. As one of the poets set to take the lectern, Paul Muldoon read "The Briefcase", which he prefaced by the following remark: "Seamus Heaney has so wonderfully made so many aspects our lives his own and so that there are certain areas which are almost off limits" (Muldoon 2009). One such restricted area, Muldoon observed, was eels: "as you know, if you pick up an eel in this country and turn it over, it'll say 'copyright Seamus Heaney' there, on the underside" (Muldoon 2009). Then the poem followed.

What distinguishes Muldoon's approach to Heaney, and it is especially visible in "The Briefcase", is its air of levity coupled with his unwavering admiration for the older poet. "The Briefcas". opens with a meticulous description of the eponymous briefcase:

> I held the briefcase at arm's length from me;
> the oxblood or liver
> eelskin with which it was covered
> had suddenly grown supple (2001, 202).

"Supple" strikes as a carefully chosen word that adequately captures the sonic evocativeness of Heaney's poetry. It certainly applies to his earliest primer "Digging" and its "Clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground" (Heaney 1966, 1); suppleness may well describe the speaker's description of the pen in "The Conway

Stewart" (a hushed premonition of the end of writing that may be regarded as a self-elegy): "Three gold bands in the clip-on screw-top" with "a spatulate" and a "thin / Pump-action lever" (Heaney 2013, 9). In "The Briefcase", Muldoon imagines himself standing in "an almighty cloudburst" about to board a bus. But he is transfixed and unable to take out "an obol" for the driver, a modern-day Charon, "for fear that [the briefcase] might slink into a culvert". This rather comical Woody Allen-like situation again leads to an ending that clasps Muldoon's response to Heaney's greatest work to date: "the briefcase might slink into a culvert / and strike out along the East River / for the sea. By which I mean the open sea". In an instant one is reminded of "A Laugh Neagh Sequence", appropriately dedicated to the fisherman:

> At Toomebridge where [the laugh] sluices towards the sea
> They've set new gates and tanks against the flow.
> From time to time they break the eels' journey (Heaney 1969, 28).

Heaney's "A Laugh Neagh Sequence" follows the journey of the eels that need to fight their way around the "new gates and tanks" in order to reach the open sea. In "Beyond Sargasso", the second poem in "A Lough Neagh Sequence", the poet focuses on the passage of the eel for the open sea:

> Against
> ebb, current, rock, rapids,
> a muscled icicle
> that melts itself longer
> and fatter, [the eel] buries
> his arrival beyond
> light and tidal water (Heaney 1969, 29).

Heaney's evocation of the eels revels in assonantal suppleness, as short vowels /e/, /a/ and /o/, which repeat across the entire stanza, are set off by regular plosive beats in a way reminiscent of the above-mentioned poems like "Digging" or "The Conway Stewart". The speaker's language begins to assimilate to the movements of the eels, thereby projecting an aura of closeness and empathy.

Muldoon's poem responds to this quality of Heaney's poem by approximating the assonantal flow shot through with plosive beats in "I held the briefcase at arm's length from me; / the oxblood or liver". However, as it evokes the possible route the poet's eelskin briefcase might travel should he release it, Muldoon's poem becomes a pastiche of "Beyond Sargasso". In lieu of Heaney's deep-thought empathy with the muscular eel,

Muldoon emphasises the inanimate aspect of the animal that is evoked as leather covering the speaker's briefcase. Heaney's poem affects wisdom, Muldoon's expresses suspicion (at best) of the carefulness with which Heaney presents the eel. Whereas Heaney's eels are "whorling their mud coronas" (Heaney 1969: 30), Muldoon summons up the image of inanimateness and deadness in eelskin leather. While Heaney's speaker is interested in the eel as an animate being, as supple as it is lively, Muldoon's only thinks of the fish as an animalistic bodily object.

Despite such an apparently depreciative attitude, "The Briefcase" does identify a congruence between nature (by now leathery and dead) and poetry. As the poet holds on to his briefcase, we learn that his principal reason is that somewhere in it, there is "the first inkling of this poem" (2001: 202). Therefore Muldoon may be regarded as derailing Heaney's seriousness, as he infuses the episode in the storm with a degree of mock heroic. Nevertheless, the deprecatory tone of "The Briefcase" is as much aimed at Heaney's gravity as at Muldoon's own lyric that resists sublimity, attending instead to the mundane. Eventually, "the open sea" is both an afterthought, added for increasing the Heaneysque effect, and a counter-point to the ending of "A Lough Neagh Sequence", in which the eels are caught by the fishermen, as "Each eel // Comes aboard to this welcome: / The hook left in gill or gum, / It's lapped into the barrel numb" (Heaney 1969, 32). This seems to be a self-reflexive passage on Heaney's part in that he admits that his attraction to the notion of origin, the place of birth, the native land, carries a deadly threat. However, despite their reckless urge to return, the eels gain the speaker's admiration for their suppleness and liveliness.

This is by no means an isolated example, for across Heaney's oeuvre eels often feature as at once representative of burgeoning life and invocations of death. In "The Graubelle Man", the Jutland corpse strikes the poet as so well-preserved that he sees "His hips" as "the ridge / and purse of a mussel, / his spine an eel arrested / under a glisten of mud" (Heaney 1975, 28). It is the use of the verb "arrested" that signals a sudden interruption of the lively image, reminding us of the fact that the Graubelle man, despite his amazingly good condition, is dead. The proximity of the marine imagery, including eels, to a summoning of death is also striking in "Glanmore Sonnets, VII", in which "Sirens of the tundra, / Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road, raise / Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize" (Heaney 1979: 34). This is a familiar old-English water-scape that the woebegone sailor descants on in the opening of *The Seafarer*: "Bitter breast-cares have I abided, / Known on my keel may a care's hold" (Anonymous 2004, 13). The arduousness that the lonely seafarer has to endure, the seas that he travels, yield

to a final invocation of a grave strewn with gold to which the lordly man's "born brothers, their buried bodies / Be an unlikely treasure hoard" (15). There is a similar aura of remembrance of past in "Glanmore Sonnets, VII", which traces the speaker's return to familiar Irish shores that is strangely sorrowful despite the speaker's unmistakeable fondness for the place. Bearing in mind some of these examples of the eel imagery, one realises that their deep-felt air of fleshly liveliness is always coupled with demise.

This brief source-tapping points not only to how conversant with Heaney's work Muldoon is but also to Muldoon's fascination with contraries. The above features flare up in Muldoon's elegy for Heaney, "Cuthbert and the Otters". As a seasoned elegiac poet (considering the glorious "Yarrow", "Incantata", "Silyhow Stride" and numerous others), Muldoon was poised to celebrate the late poet and long-time friend. But "Cuthbert and the Otters", as will here be shown, is an elegy only insofar as it questions its own status as elegy, being more focused on preserving the imaginary conversation with the body of work rather than merely seeking to preserve the memory of Heaney the man.

The opening of "Cuthbert and the Otters" redeploys typical formal features of Muldoon's recent work in that the images, though masterfully linked together through syntax, on closer inspection seem on the one hand to be a little too premeditated and on the other occasionally incongruous.

> Notwithstanding the fact that one of them has gnawed a strip of flesh
> from the shoulder of the salmon,
> relieving it of a little darne,
> the fish these six otters would fain
> carry over the sandstone limen
> and into Cuthbert's cell, a fish garlanded with bay leaves
> and laid out on a linden flitch
> like a hauberked warrior laid out on his shield,
> may yet be thought of as a whole (Muldoon 2015, 3).

Six otters are carrying "'An entire fish for an abbot's supper'", the fish is painstakingly, though not a little surprisingly, made to invoke Danish warriors, whom the poet refuses to call Vikings. The compound image of the six otters carrying a fish, the Danes who "are already dyeing everything beige" and "The Benedictines" who "still love a bit of banter / along with the Beatitudes" (Muldoon 2015: 3) is then set against what turns out to be a depiction of the retrieval of a body from the morgue, which suddenly focuses the scene on the instant when the poet takes the role of the pallbearer:

Blessed is the trundle bed,
it readies us for the tunnel
from Spital Tongues to the straithes. I'm at once full of dread
and in complete denial.
I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead (4).

As is often the case in Muldoon, the autobiographical context must not be accepted unconditionally. We have known him to beguile us into accepting that his sister's name is May in "Cuba", or that his aunt did have a clandestine affair with one Ned Kelly; but we have also known him to tell us more or less the truth about Joe Ward in "Anseo" or his former partner Mary Farl Powers in "Incantata". In "Cuthbert and the Otters", despite the fact that, for example, the location details do not match, the speaker seems to be a version of Paul Muldoon, the pallbearer in Seamus Heaney's funeral ceremony who is "'at once full of dread / and in complete denial'".

Reading his eulogy at the funeral, an occasion painfully reminiscent of the jaunty night in 1995 when he read "The Briefcase", Muldoon mentioned his arrival in Dublin. A Customs officer asked him what he did for a living and when Muldoon responded he taught poetry, the officer replied, "You must be devastated" (MacDonald). Even though some of this devastation is discernible in the recurrent admission that "I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead", one remembers what Verlain said about Tennyson (said to no other than Yeats): "when he should have been broken-hearted [he] had many reminiscences" (qtd. in Yeats 495). Like Tennyson (the author of the "The Voyage of Maeldune", a version of "Immram curaig Mail Dúin" for which Muldoon expressed particular dislike), Muldoon has many reminiscences and thoughts in line with his earlier poem "Something else", in which the thought of Gerard de Nerval's suicide makes the speaker "think / of something else, then something else again" (2001, 173).

In "Cuthbert and the Otters", however, there seems to be a disjunction between the poetic persona and the voice of the pallbearer that insists on being characterised as a version of Muldoon himself. In the opening of the poem, the animals that the speaker summons: the otters and the salmon are frequently to be found in Heaney's own verse. First of all, Heaney's "The Otter" plays a vital role as an intertext, for the poem is a celebration of life:

I loved your wet head and smashing crawl,
Your fine swimmer's back and shoulders
Surfacing and surfacing again
This year and every year since (1979, 43).

In Heaney's poem, the otter exists outside the remit of reference, it does not occupy any position within the symbolic dome of language, representing nothing but its own litheness: "You were beyond me. / The mellowed clarities, the grape-deep air / Thinned and disappointed" (43). *Field Work*, the volume in which "The Otter" was first collected, opens with the anthology-beloved "Oysters". However, while "Oysters" emphasises the crustaceans' central place in the symbolic landscape of oppression and violation, from the Roman times until the Irish Troubles, "The Otter" is too elusive an animal to be burdened by conceptual schemes: "You are my palpable, lithe / Otter of memory / In the pool of the moment" (43). The poet does not fail to register the otter's presence but only as part of memory that helps him evoke the animal that is not physically to be seen.

In "Glanmore Sonnets, I", Heaney ruminatively states that "the good life could be to cross a field / And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / Of ploughs" (1979, 28). Here it is art that sets up the paradigm for earth, so that the poet becomes an "etymologist of roots and graftings" (28), a fit description of Heaney's work in "Broagh" and "Anahorish" that stress the connection between the land and the language. In his capacity as the "etymologist of roots and graftings", Heaney can reasonably retort the approaching armoured convoy in "The Toome Road": "O charioteers, above your dormant guns, / It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass, / The invisible, utoppled omphalos" (7). In the context of these poems, "The Otter" is all the more surprising, as the poem insists not so much on its position within a symbolic system as on the fact that the otter precedes all symbolisation. "The Otter" has a distinct melodic echo of Ted Hughes's "Thought-Fox" and its incantatory quality in "Two eyes serve a moment, that now / And again now, and now, and now / Sets neat prints in the snow" (2003, 21) in Heaney's repetition of "Surfacing and surfacing again / This year and every year since" (1979, 43). Heaney is dealing with life in a language that is pushing for what he has frequently called "opened ground" (in "Glanmore Sonnets, I" and "II") – unhampered by the symbolic veneer of words, the poem seeks to become the object it describes so that after its completion the awestruck poet might only state like Hughes: "The page is printed" (2003, 21).

The salmon, carried by the otters in Muldoon's poem, is another potent image in Heaney, given thorough treatment in "The Salomon Fisher to the Salmon". In the poem, the speaker is fishing for salmon that he knows will come this way, following the inexorable call of its instinct: "your exile in the sea / Unconditionally cancelled by the pull / Of your home water's gravity" (1969, 8). The salmon feels compelled to return to its home waters even if this return spells a death sentence for it. Heaney has thematised this pull of the birthplace in numerous poems like "Summer 1969" from his sequence "Singing

School": "While the Constabulary covered the mob / Firing into the Falls, I was suffering / Only the bullying sun of Madrid" (1975, 64). Although the poet's absence from the 1969 riots in Belfast is hardly his fault, he cannot exonerate himself, like the salmon feeling the instinctual tug to return to his place of origin. But in "The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon" the poet is there to kill: "I go, like you, by gleam and drag // And will strike when you strike, to kill" (1969, 8). This, however, results in numbness at the end of the poem: "I will turn home, fish-smelling, scaly" (8). The successful capture of the salmon leaves the poet barren of emotion. In his poem, Heaney battles the sentiment that Yeats put forth in "The Fisherman", "This wise and simple man" who "does not exist" (1998, 148–149). For Yeats, the fisherman represents the simple life from which all artistic ladders start but for Heaney the fisherman is in no way as idealistic a persona. This empathy with the man, however fallible he might prove to be, translates into "Cuthbert and the Otters". In Muldoon's poem, side by side with the evocation of bare life in the image of the otters, one detects a hint of sadness on the part of the poetic persona as the pilgrimage of the animals represents a celebration of life as much as painful reminder of death.

Muldoon's unexpected swerve of imagination leads from the salmon that the otters are carrying for Cuthbert to an association of the fish with the "hauberked warrior laid out on his shield". References to Vikings recur throughout the poem and again one discerns a gesture towards Heaney's own evocation of the Norsemen, particularly in "The Tollund Man", in which the poet travels to Aarhus, second largest city in Denmark, to see for himself the perfectly preserved corpse of the 4th century man. The aura of near-sacred fascination yields in the last stanza to an invocation of killing: "Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (1972, 37). Once more the poet endures the summons from home and once more it is home entwined with death that he imagines.

Therefore the image-scape that Muldoon brings together, though seemingly discordant, seems to be modelled on aspects of Heaney's own poetic world. As a result, the associative flow of images in the poem becomes a ruse against the end, against death itself. In this sense, "Cuthbert and the Otters" repeats the tactic of Muldoon's celebrated elegies from The Annals of Chile, especially "Incantata", which resists closure by offering a list of what is left of Muldoon's late friend and lover, the artist Mar Farl Powers. As Peter MacDonald observed, "this capacity [of 'Incantata'] to become 'something else, then something else again,' seems almost to suspend duration in the poem, or rather to postpone its ultimate resolution in the conclusion of the list" (MacDonald 1997, 185). And yet, the sonic pattern in "Incantata" that rhymes the stanzas in the first part of the poem

with those in the second "means that the proximity of [that] ending is measured" (185). The implication of the inevitability of death that in "Incantata" is given in the patterning of the stanzas, in "Cuthbert and the Otters" is signalled by the moments when the voice interrupts the story of the otters brining the salmon to Cuthbert with descriptions of the funeral ceremony. Thus "Cuthbert and the Otters" ponders what it means to celebrate life if it is necessarily combined with death but the engagement with Heaney's own poetry throughout Muldoon's poem represents also an attempt to forestall the death of the poem.

Muldoon ended his lectures as Oxford Professor of poetry, later collected as *The End of the Poem*, by discussing none other than Heaney's "Keeping Going;" he concludes that "to carry itself forward in the world – testing itself, and us, against a sense of how it itself 'was / In the beginning, is now and shall be' – is indeed the end of the poem" (2006, 395). In this sense the long poem represents the inherent drive of poetry, to resist "coming to a close, or drawing its own conclusions" (299) and part of this resistance lies in the fact that poems find a prolongation of their life in new poems by other poets. Thus the poetic persona in "Cuthbert and the Otters" makes a deliberate choice to engage Heaney's work, rather than him as a person, for in this way the oeuvre that with the poet's demise might seem to have reached a pronounced finality is once again an "open ground".

Finally, there is no escaping the fact that the otters carrying the salmon embody and parallel the poetic persona and his various engagements with Heaney's poetic oeuvre. They are carrying the salmon much like Heaney's salmon-casting fisherman, but also they "might still be thought of as a whole" in the sense that the poet in "The Toome Road" envisions himself privy to the "untoppled omphalos;" they are pilgrimaging to the saint like the poet in "The Tollund Man" is journeying to Aarhus – this Aarhus that Heaney pronounced as "our house", thus making his speaker's trip a self-reflexive one. It is home, the place of unalloyed pull for the native element, that Heaney's speakers, much like Novalis in his hymns, are always going to. Muldoon catches on to this pilgrimage aspect of Heaney's work and its motif of musing over life and death, as he declares: "I think of an otter cortege / passing under a colonnade of fig trees // barren despite their show of foliage" (2015, 11). Barrenness and foliage, the irreducible and stark fact of death and the lush ruse towards life fuse in the otters that march to Cuthbert just like Muldoon-the speaker wants "that coffin to cut a notch // in [his] clavicle" (11). In effect, whereas the otters and the poetic persona seek to prolong life as poetic utterance, resisting closure and so battling death, Muldoon-the speaker can only bring himself to admit that he "cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead". This recurrent line yields to the

inescapable bare, as well as barren, fact that our life is a being-towards-death that puts down all poetic attempts to shade that fact.

Therefore what transpires from "Cuthbert and the Otters" is the fact that while Seamus Heaney, the man, is passed away, Seamus Heaney, the great "skald" (2015, 10), as Muldoon calls him, can survive as the oeuvre that calls for engagement from other poets. Death is thus a finality that remains unmediated and Muldoon repeatedly realises that Heaney's demise is a devastating event past any compensation. If there is redemption in verse, as Heaney insisted there is, it inheres in the persistence, rather than the Yeatsian perfection, of the work, in the poems' motivational value approached as it is in "Cuthbert and the Otters", so that – like with "the journeyman tailor" from "At Banagher" – the world of poetry "Is opener for [the poem] being in it" (1996, 68).

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