CHAPTER 11

Maggot

'Like the whorl of an out-of-this-world ear…,' (74) run the first words of the one-sentence, four-stanza sign-centered sonnet '@.' The most fluorescent language poem in *Maggot* appears as a very apposite sign of what can be termed Muldoonian 'p@stmodernism.' The term signals mainly post-Madoc poems in Muldoon's poetry, from e.g. 'Crossing the Line' and 'The Plot' to several in this volume, which engage with the ethical consequences of what appears to be merely an issue of linguistic or technical interest. '@' swirls with four subordinate clauses that never amount to a sentence in a very enigmatic, language-conscious 'hacked' sonnet that, in keeping with our digital era, reflects upon the history and consequences of new media. Undoubtedly, the digital reformation of the last few decades has entailed serious ethical dilemmas for our civilisation, dilemmas not unique to the current epoch of WikiLeaks, the Snowden case and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which have put these issues before the general public in unprecedented ways. Other poems in the volume delve more directly, i.e. in terms of Muldoonian language, into Adornian aspects of existential darkness. Lines like 'Who knew that *humus* might lie beneath "humane"?' (65) and 'Maybe you'll give me a sign?' (73), for example, present two discrete sentences from the murder investigations in 'The Humors of Hakone' and the war, siege and starvation in 'Love Poem with Pig.' They highlight yet again the confluence of language and dark themes in Muldoon's poetic language. The language in Muldoon's eleventh volume in 2010 is still extraordinary, conspicuous and conducive to speculation on the human condition, way beyond Kennedy-Andrew's binary evaluation that sees Muldoon as an 'emotionally evasive joker' who displays, nevertheless, a 'profound ethical seriousness.'[1] Self-reflexive quips and questions with ethical, existential and metaphysical depth, such as those quoted above, appear throughout the volume. Etymological detours, homonymic serendipity, subtle sound distributions, abstruse sonnets, circular sentences and semiotic superabundance, just to mention a few phenomena, still mark his poetry. Many titles, from the opening 'Plan B' via 'Nope,' 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett,' 'Ohrwurm,' '@,' 'Lines for the Quatercentenary of the Voyage of the Halve Maen' to 'Yup' and 'Balls,' attract attention to letters, slang, syntactic units, other languages, signs, bawdiness, polysemantic undecidability and

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[1] Kennedy-Andrews, 'Introducing Paul Muldoon: "Arbitrary and Contrary,"' 5.

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many other linguistic phenomena that creep and crawl, hop and stop, fly and flutter in and across most poems in the volume, including the poems without titles that flag their linguistic experimentation. Metaphorically, beasts and birds also suggest Muldoonian language, sentence, form and matter – not least the titular maggot. And as a beast of alienation and estrangement, maggots compare unfavorably with horses and tend to turn Shklovsky's defamiliarising horses into apparently loveable pets.

Maggot is strikingly evocative and suggestive. The highly metaphoric and phonetically hard-hitting bi-syllabic titular word, which chimes in Muldoonian fashion with *Madoc* and *Mules* in more manners than sound, crawls and curls with a plethora of hermeneutic possibilities, both in general terms and in specifically lingual litheness. *Maggot* engages, like *Madoc*, with larger narratives by tangential method, and continues the bestiary from *Mules*. Horses from Muldoon's previous volume *Horse Latitudes* are given a rest for a spacious vista of zoological specimens: dolphins, porcupines, hares, pigs, insects, elephants and circus animals, and, of course, maggots. An aviary consisting of albatross, quail, geese and humming birds expands the imagery of bird poems from the previous collection. Ideas of conference and speech of birds now extend to the social cackle and technological twitter and tweets of our technological age. Many of these zoological and ornithological poems testify to Muldoon's statement of beasts and birds in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Beasts* that 'it seems that in poetry, as in life, animals bring out the best in us.'[2] Many of these beastly poems testify to the contrary; most of them testify to both. The title and poems in *Maggot* are equally suggestive as those in *Horse Latitudes*, although two more dissimilar creatures can hardly be found in nature. Yet they frequently meet at the end of the races, at the end of the day: maggot wriggles as a repulsive *memento mori*. As the great equaliser and the minister of rot and decay, maggot also exerts its mouldy influences throughout the volume. Where *Horse Latitudes* reeled towards disease and death, *Maggot* gravitates towards death and aftermath. Although most poems entertain ambiguities of vitality and mortality, impressions of doom, destruction, death and decay prevail in many: 'Moryson's Fancy,' 'Fish Ladder,' 'Maggot,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'The Sod Farm,' 'Another Porcupine,' 'Wayside Shrines.' Nevertheless, the volume, again with great ambiguity, also pulsates with what the blurb terms a Yeatsian inspiration for 'sex and the dead,' and a typically more Muldoonesque 'extravagant linkage of rot and the erotic.' Indeed, very few of these poems, metaphors, words, sentences, pleasures and displeasures of the text come without life-giving potency and morbid drives. From explicit titles and lines – 'The Fling,' 'Balls,' 'Love Poem with Pig,' 'on my hands and knees to nuzzle your but,' (32) 'Commie quim' (49) – to semantic plenitude and metaphorical multiplicity – 'Extraordinary Rendition,' maggot, porcupine, humming birds – the volume variously appears as cocked and erectile as the wild and weird erotics of *New Weather*, *Mules* and *Quoof*.

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[2] Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Beasts*, xv.

The sentence still contributes to artistic refinement, to a sense of construction and to indications of ethical purport. 'A Hare at Aldergrove' hops and leaps in lines and sentence, and across many lingual and textual fields.[3] A wh-sentence starts 'Love Poem with Pig' and dependent clauses start other poems. Six of the seven sections in the opening poem, 'Plan B,' spin one sentence poems, as do two (II and IV) of the five sonnets in 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett.' Entire poems, like 'A Christmas in the Fifties,' 'My Lord Byron's Maggot,' 'The Fling,' 'A Mayfly' and 'A Second Humming Bird,' follow suit. Many poems, for example 'Plan B,' 'When the Pie Was Opened,' 'Francois Boucher: Arion on Dolphin,' assume linkage and coherence by repeating the last phrase or sentence at the end of a stanza in the beginning of the next. 'The Fish Ladder,' 'Quail' and all ten sections in 'The Side Project' begin with the reflection of time slipping by, of 'Forty years' elapsing, with echoes of the Belfast Group forty years earlier and its poetics that intersected with Muldoon's poetry, Heaneyspeak and Frostian influence, with a glancing allusion to the biblical exodus. Several poems adopt intricate timespans, not least the temporal planes in 'The Side Project.' All sections of 'The Rowboat' start and end with the same sentence. 'Maggot,' nine sonnets with the same rhyme words in the same order in the same stanzaic composition, starts with 'I used to' to indicate monotony, routine, repetition and change. After the volta, the third stanza runs the same in all sonnets to change temporality, place, perspective and mood: 'where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim' (42–50). Divided and connected, the same arbitrary refrain of love, uncertainty and whimsicality turns up again in a later sonnet: 'Loss of Separation: A Companion.' Muldoon's sense of sounds, structure and sentence is really something else. However artificial or arbitrary some of his critics may judge such Muldoonian methods, the ability to mesmerise the reader is still strong. These verbal acrobatics certainly suit their subject matter and, arguably, they add strange melodies and qualities of deft precision and astounding brilliance to his poetry. Phrasal interjections, reiterations of sentences, syntactic parallels and far-reaching correspondences draw our attention to different modes of coherence and interpretational logic that may be said to run across his poems and through his volumes. These wide-ranging modes frequently resist conventional methods of close reading. If a sentence forms a unit for a single thought, this intricate and involved way of thinking poetry creates clusters of themes and ideas that belong together as much as their words or syntax do. That the same word, phrase, sound or sentence might spur an entirely different thought, and an ability to keep two ideas in mind at the same time, play an important part in this technique, as is wryly indicated by such doubled poems as 'Geese' and 'More Geese,' 'A Humming Bird' and 'A Second Humming Bird' and 'A Porcupine' and 'Another Porcupine.' All of these poems construe their language and form in ways that prompt an assessment of contemporary information technology. They also engage with the poetics and politics of the back rooms in Belfast, and with the broader encounters between different cultures. They simultaneously echo and revise the disruptive and discordant syntax that was much more preponderant in his first volumes. Most poems in *Maggot* continue the constructive compositions and ethical implications of *Moy Sand and Gravel*, albeit with much more equivocation and prevarication, and with far less directness than some parts of *Horse Latitudes* and Muldoon's concomitant commentary upon that volume.

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[3] Hares and rabbits hop around in poetry. In contemporary poetry from Northern Ireland, these poems constitute a little sub-genre of their own, one to which Muldoon's earlier poem 'I Remember Sir Alfred' (WBL, 18) serves as an important example, and one which this later poem also crosses. 'St Louis pretty much created Eliot's tongue even as he attempted to betray it. I especially see signals of that in *Inventions of the March Hare*, where one also sees the misogynist, the racist,' Muldoon comments upon Eliot's early poetry. Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' 76. For an enormously entertaining and informative essay on the many intricate interpretations of hares and rabbits in the poetics and politics of Belfast, see Brearton, 'Hare and Rabbit,' 64–69.

In wider terms, both *Horse Latitudes* and *Maggot* situate themselves against the political polemics and hegemonic discourses of their own day in a language and imaginative mysteriousness that transcend these limitations. These verses, as with most of Muldoon's poetry, bear upon posteriority and the past: new futures require transformations in, amongst other things, perceptions of self, of social structures and of national identification, and of the many cognitive structures that contribute to forms of life and being, or to a rediscovery of values that have been waylaid and lost. Imagination and language with a propensity for the aberrant and apparently unintelligible tend to prompt cognition, whereas congealed language and comprehensions of language as mere means of communication and reference ultimately belong more to categories of confirmation. Muldoonesque language is frequently a Teflon language that dares first to look for the next and previous letter, for the new and old rhyme, for the next new transition in tradition and for the next line, clause and sentence– a language that runs unstoppably from remote recesses, a language that dares first to look for italicettes, alterratives, quoofs, horse latitudes and maggots. Such language affects unpredictably the many valencies with which it interacts, and has more impact than a language derived from secondary reference points and from the atavistic conviction that language is translucent for all people and all purposes. Muldoon's linguistic intelligence and eye for the less utilised parts of the lexicon, and his deployment of non-standard syntax and grammar have, since *Madoc* and *Hay*, taken a slight turn towards the less Muldoonesque although his creative processes are still marked by some recognisable Muldoonisms: 'imarraghes,' 'wonderbirth,' 'the pied,' 'the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible,' 'liminality,' 'narthecality,' 'Londonderridean.'[4] To some extent this shift ensues from the change in critical climate that Muldoon has exerted himself through his poetry, through his essays on literature, and through his professional roles as Princeton professor and poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, alongside a wider acceptance of French theory and approaches to poetry. His previous volumes assist veteran readers in the understanding of new ones and his own essays can always be read in relation to his own creative processes. Institutionalisation and widespread knowledge of post-structuralist theories and deconstructive thought also facilitate insight into and acceptance of the importance of his poetry. The fact that his forms of linguistic introspection have as much bearing as his metaphorical indirection upon ideological formation, political hegemony and public discourses, appears even more evident now than when the Troubles seemed the most immediate context of interpretation. Some of the directness of *Horse Latitudes*, and in the 2004 Book of the Year columns in the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Future Dictionary of America* entries, also served to remind ordinary readers and critical commentators of the frameworks into which his linguistic focus may be said to fit. Whereas strands of *Horse Latitudes* are interwoven with political polemics on the Iraq War and the opposing discourses on this international conflict between the Americans and the French, much of *Maggot* pits itself against political actions and moral dilemmas in the aftermath of that war – with noticeably more poetic hesitancy, metaphorical vagueness and lingual indirection than parts of its preceding volume. In *Maggot*, Muldoon's by now somewhat less alienating tricks and techniques of language make the volume seem more approachable and his evolving treatment of the sentence and symbolic use of syntax provide new possibilities for interpretation.

Reviews of *Maggot* reveal a perception of language more in tune with Muldoon's own dissenting convictions on the characteristics and strengths of language. Nick Laird asserts: 'Muldoon is an authentic poet of the psychoanalytic error (read "era") who thinks of language as an active agent, signifying at levels below our consciousness.'[5] Laird's acumen aligns itself with several of Muldoon's affirmations (as well as his poem 'Errata'). 'I think one can only be faithful to the language and the way it presents itself to you,' he had told John Haffenden in 1981.[6] Muldoon upholds his reverence for language also in *Maggot*, and provides a rationale for one of his own watermarks in 'The Point of Poetry:' 'The urge to set down words in particular patterns is one of our most basic human impulses.' 'Rhyme is sometimes seen, improperly, as being imposed upon language rather than occurring in quite unforced ways within the language itself.'[7] Muldoon advocates a patterning of language as a vital part of human activity, and understands language, especially rhyme, in ways that are often contentious, even among poets. His linguistic apartness is a main reason for the artistic distinctiveness of his poetry. Laird appreciates Muldoon as 'the most formally ambitious and technically innovative of modern poets, he writes poems like no one else.'[8] Most reviewers, like Laird, comment upon language. Prospero notes that Muldoon still keeps language as the principle parameter for his poetry: '*Maggot*, his 11th book of poetry, finds him once again pushing and inventing new boundaries for language.'[9] Rachel A. Burns explains one interesting feature of Muldoon's submission to language – 'the buoyancy of Muldoon's language overcomes the sobriety of his subjects' – but is mainly more concerned, like so many others, with describing Muldoon's use of language than discussing its points and purposes: 'The energy of Muldoon's language is in part a result of his mixing of contemporary references and slang with a wide range of historical and literary allusions.'[10] Laura Marsh maintains an old depreciative device: 'Esoteric pranks are, increasingly, the fuel for Muldoon's poems.'[11] Josh Cook honours the poems as 'artifices of evocative language that imply much more than they state.'[12] Adam Newey is fascinated by

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[4] Muldoon, 'Getting Round. Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,' 113; *To Ireland, I*, 1, 5; 'Canon and Colcannon: Review of *The Rattle of the North* by Patricia Craig,' 22.

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[5] Nick Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon,' *The New York Review*, 23 June 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/06/23/triumph-paul-muldoon/, accessed 27 May 2019.

[6] Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 133.

[7] Muldoon, 'The Point of Poetry,' 503–505.

[8] Laird, 'The Triumph of Paul Muldoon.'

[9] Prospero, 'The Q & A: Paul Muldoon, Poet,' http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2010/10/new_poetry, accessed 17 April 2019.

[10] Rachel A. Burns, 'Poet Muldoon Mesmerizes with *Maggot*,' *The Harvard Crimson* (2010), http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/9/21/maggot-paul-muldoon/, accessed 17 April 2019.

[11] Laura Marsh, 'Animality: *Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *New Republic* (2011), https://newrepublic.com/article/79272/maggot-paul-muldoon, accessed 19 April 2019.

[12] Josh Cook, '*Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *Bookslut* (2010), http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2010_10_016686.php, accessed 17 April 2019.

'some decidedly spivvy turns of phrase,' and captures many aspects of Muldoon's language in the book:

> In terms of style, the continuity with the earlier book is clear: there's the same glancing, seemingly accidental association of ideas, the hammeringly insistent rhymes, the rapid shifts of diction, from high intellectual arcana to low demotic, and the sense of a teemingly fertile natural world that comes freighted with mythic significance … decidedly spivvy turns of phrase … Well, perhaps Muldoon's ideal reader is as culturally well-resourced as he is; for the rest of us, there's always Google … There's a loose-limbed, gangling quality to these poems, where one idea sparks another seemingly by accident of pun or homophone, or rhyme. It's no accident, of course, because this is a poet who is always firmly in control of where he's going.[13]

The language of Muldoon's poetry has at the time of the publication of *Maggot* in 2010 assumed such importance that it not only becomes an unavoidable aspect of any review, his consistent immersion in language has also fostered changes in views on language as much as views on his own poetry. A more neutral or even positive tone of review has replaced the earlier incomprehension and negative appraisal on the part of some critics. This new tone is reflected in the critical debate on the language of Muldoon's poetry. Nevertheless, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews asserts in his introduction to a collection of critical essays on Muldoon's writing that one of the many questions that reappears in the critical reception of Muldoon's poetry is whether he is 'merely a highly inventive but emotionally evasive joker playing a slippery, virtuous game of words and rhymes and allusions' or a poet 'in which this playfulness and cleverness contributes to profound ethical seriousness?'[14] At a superficial level, the question is of some interest, but otherwise this traditional schismatic approach to Muldoon's language is as redundant as it is reductive. Certainly, Muldoon is a highly inventive virtuoso game player with language, but he is not emotionally evasive. First, such a postulation, the traditional one in the reviewing of Muldoon's poetry that Kennedy-Andrews questions, bases its premise on a clear-cut definition of emotionality from which the ludic and the humorous are excluded. Secondly, in like manner, playfulness and cleverness are separated from ethical seriousness, as if the comic and the entertaining were always bright and light and never dark and doom-laden, as if the playful and the clever from Aristophanes and Swift to stand-up comedy and late-night TV-shows never engage(d) with profound ethical dilemmas. Thirdly, the postulation presumes that language is always secondary and translucent and never a primary mover and multifarious shaker itself in the understanding of ethics and the critique of false premises, lies and hypocrisy. Finally, if Muldoon is merely a showman in the shambles, a joker to the king, a comedian in the killing fields, a madcap in the abattoir – which he clearly also is – these roles are crucial to moral concerns and ethical debate.

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[13] Adam Newey, '*Maggot* by Paul Muldoon,' *The Guardian*, 30 October 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/30/paul-muldoon-maggot-review, accessed 17 April 2019.

[14] Kennedy-Andrews, *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, 5, 17. Muldoon's language is controversial and Kennedy-Andrews' dilemma encapsulates many previous comments on his language. John Carey has upbraided Muldoon's 'refusal to communicate,' while Alan Holinghurst deems Muldoon's language 'a *tour-de-force*' which leads nowhere 'The Stain of Words,' 56; 'Telling Tales: New Poetry,' 80–85. David Annwn indicates 'linguistic hubris,' 'Review of *Why Brownlee Left* by Paul Muldoon,' *Anglo-Irish Review* 69 (1981), 74–79. John Goodby detects Muldoon's language crisis already in *Mules*, '"Armageddon, Armageddon." Language and Crisis in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon,' in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1986), 229–236. Derek Mahon explores the idiosyncratic characteristics in Muldoon's poetry in 'Quaat?' 27–28. David Wheatley discusses the dimension of Gaelic in Muldoon's poetry in 'The

Muldoon's use of language in *Maggot* engages both humorous and playful qualities, as well as profound and serious elements. 'When the Pie Was Opened' offers a fine example of the use of language that integrates the serious and the ludic. The famous nursery rhyme of the title provides an imaginative point of departure for a multi-associative poem on individual disease, strained human relationships and public concerns. Struggles of everyday life are juxtaposed with classic heroes such as 'Hector, Ajax, Ferdia, Cuchulainn,' but the serious matter and epic reference are balanced by the infantile title. Another poem, 'The Side Project,' juxtaposes the world of the circus with the world of streetwise politics. The language and world of children and entertainment frequently check the troubled world of adults in Muldoon's poetry. Several other poems in *Maggot* activate a serioludic language that not only balances the tragic and the comic, but also offers a more profound scrutiny of language, and furnishes artistic impetus for a renewal of human language and thinking. 'Nope' and

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Aistriúchán Cloak: Paul Muldoon and the Irish Language,' 123–134. Edna Longley and Jonathan Allison point to Muldoon's uncanny use of verbs and modalities in 'Varieties of Parable: Louis MacNeice and Paul Muldoon,' in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), 211–241; '"Everything Provisional." Fictive Possibility and the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson,' 87–93. Peter Denman displays the elegance of Muldoon's post-Saussurean hypograms in '"O Mould-Breaker and Pun-Maker": Paul Muldoon and the Prosody of the Letter,' in *Paul Muldoon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 2006), 19–36.

'Yup' balance entertainment and solemnity. Fun, hilarity, irony, satire and sarcasm contradict, coincide and converge with sadness, sorrow, earnestness, seriousness, solemnity and respect. One of many strengths in Muldoon's poetry is that these emotions can be undefined, confused, mingled. One of the many fulcrums of his language is that letters, lexicon and larger lines continue to define the complexity of the human condition, and that his poetic language frequently resists giving in to the expected language of enjoyment or that of the ethically serious.

Michael Longley's witty comment that Muldoon can rhyme a cat with a dog pinpoints Muldoon's sensitivity to sounds and his facility in creating unexpected linguistic constellations.[15] The comment also serves to remind readers that *Maggot* rhymes with *Madoc*, Muldoon's collection of poetry from 1990 that might be regarded as the apogee of his engagement with the enigmas of language, and, perhaps, warrants the label of poetry's equivalent to *Finnegans Wake*. In the context of creative writing and critical analysis from Joyce to Longley, the title *Maggot* is dangled as bait for the critical fish to catch. As the reception of Muldoon's poetry from his debut with *New Weather* in 1973 has shown, there are many piranhas in the critical pond: some fight ferociously, some do not take the bait at all. As a much-published reviewer, a long-standing professor of creative writing at Princeton University, the Oxford Professor of Poetry 1999–2004 and the *New Yorker* editor of poetry 2007–2017, Muldoon knows full well how the literary swim works in its different critical waters. Secondly, maggot might function as a figure of self-identification, another subjective correlative, and suggest Muldoon himself, the poet, or indeed other poets and writers in general. It casts the poet in the image of a creature that crawls around in his own hidden realm, digesting its own matter, mostly ignored or even despised by most people, apart from anglers, children and biologists. Maggots do a vital job that most often goes unnoticed. Maggots – blind, despicable, mostly unseen – are part of a popular pastime in some small piscatorial circles, but entirely necessary for everyone in their and renovation of dead materials and stale matter. Maggot could also be a symbol of poetry itself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of Muldoon's favourite books, a maggot is a 'soft-bodied apodous larva, esp. of a housefly, blowfly, or other dipteran fly, typically found in decaying organic matter and formerly supposed to be generated by decay.'[16] With this definition in mind, maggot connects poetry directly to death and decomposition. However, with all its implications of metamorphosis from a blind, earthbound creature to an insect of the air famous for its enlarged eyes, the figure of the maggot testifies to the transformative powers of poetry and its agile eyes for a wider world. Obviously, this choice of maggot as a metaphor for poetry also undercuts the standard trope of the chrysalis of a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, and many of the Romanticist ideas of poetry associated with that idea of creative transformation. The conception of poetry as maggot-ridden becomes even clearer when it is compared to and contrasted with other similar metaphors in Muldoon's collection and in this volume, for example all the Yeatsian circus animals, all the beasts and all the birds. In all their variety, none of these have the same gravitation towards the macabre, towards the moribund and the mortal. 'We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots,' Hamlet reminds us all.[17]

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[15] See Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian*, 29; Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 141.

[16] 'My wife has just bought me the 13-volume *OED* as a present; I just love it.' AA, 'A Cat to Catch a Muse: Interview with Paul Muldoon,' 14.

Maggots also make up a substantial part of the collection's stylistic and thematic concerns. The metaphor of larva is incorporated in many poems, not only in the title poem 'Maggot,' but also in 'Ohrwurm' and '@,' and in its transformations as fly in 'A Mayfly' and 'Capriccio in E minor for Blowfly and Strings.' On an intertextual level maggot suggests how themes and techniques in this volume creep and crawl from one poem to the next and then migrate further afield. From this intertextual perspective, the proximity of maggots to worms and the poem in the volume written in memory of Samuel Beckett, 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett,' serve to connect *Maggot* with Beckett's writing. Beckett's universe, in particular the one of Mahood and Worm in *The Unnamable* in Beckett's *Trilogy* where language seems forever to fail to articulate existential dilemmas and individual pain, suggests some fertile soil for Muldoon's *Maggot*. And who knows, perhaps these maggots appear as a transmutation of the many eels that swim back and forth between Heaney's, Muldoon's and the international canon of eel poetry? Parts of Muldoon's *Maggot* certainly reverts to the old grounds of his own – and Heaney's – poetry in a similar way to what Heaney does at the beginning of *Electric Light*.

The trope of the maggot may prompt further hermeneutic connections to be made. If maggot indicates death and decay, it also suggests song, dance and play. Maggot was formerly used in the title of many dance tunes, as it is also used in this volume in the poem 'My Lord Byron's Maggot.' The light and sprightly tones and tunes of these lines add a counterpoint to the many weighty leitmotifs of the collection, just as the reference to Lord Byron points to the complexity of high idealism and personal conduct. The allusion to Lord Byron captures the uncanny atmosphere of dedication and debauchery on the part of the delegates at 'the Motivational Seminar' (56) in Muldoon's Byronic maggot. Figuratively, maggot designates parasitical people and pernicious influences. Delegates at 'the Motivational seminar,' whether they are politicians or poets, may or may not belong to this group, but other poems in this collection, for example 'Plan B' and 'Extraordinary Rendition,' associate parasitism and perniciousness with the people of power who benefit from a system they continuously debase. Both poems are laden with questions of political power and individual rights, and with the fragile position of the individual human being in a time when many states have resorted to anti-democratic measures to defend their own sense of 'democracy.' The artistically self-reflexive interrogations in 'Plan B,' for example, run parallel to state violations of individual rights:

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[17] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1601), IV. 3, 21.

> like a confession extorted from a birch,
> the foot-wide pedestal upon which a prisoner would perch
>
> on one leg in the former KGB headquarters
> like a white stork
>
> before tipping into a pool of icy water,
> to be reinstated more than once by a guard with a pitchfork. (4)

The suppressive agencies of state might have changed – 'former KGB' – but the dehumanising methods of violent interrogation continue. Torture by water strikes a raw contemporary nerve in the controversial state-authorised waterboarding in several jurisdictions, most flagrantly by one of the world's leading democracies, the USA, in the wake of the 9/11 calamities. The very title of the other poem, 'Extraordinary Rendition,' refers directly to the many enforced disappearances and ghost detainees that result from the abduction and illegal transfer of a person from one nation to another, particularly for the purposes of violent interrogation for political reasons – a crucial question of democracy and human rights highlighted by the existence of the Guantanamo interrogation centre. In the new political climate after the cold war, the two poems question the people in power who deprive others of liberty in the name of the supposed democracy they represent and which fostered them. Finally, one should not forget that the archaic sense of maggot still exists in some regions as a colloquialism for a whimsical, eccentric, strange and perverse notion or idea. In this respect, maggots suggest a symbol for Muldoon's powers of poetry; his ability to attend to the unexpected and the unpalatable, frequently in a language that has been retrieved from dark recesses and unseen places – his talent for acting the maggot.

Not only do maggots take on multiple meanings in this volume as metaphors of poetry and poets, politics and politicians, and as creatures that metaphorically confront unpopular topics, they also appear as figures of language. On a lexical level, the language in this collection is characterised by multiple semantics and the typical Muldoonian exploration of etymological layers. On a syntactical level, the language surprises with the unpredictable movements of line and sentence. On a narrative level – 'The Humors of Hakone' and 'Yup' are specimens of Muldoonian alterrative – the experimental language parallels the many twists and turns of the collection's themes and topics. Muldoon's way with language is original, complex and divagatory. 'Balls,' for example, calls for a snicker, just as much as the verses are filled with substantive matters and grim humour. Muldoon declares that he has taken 'The Cock,' 'Dafydd ap Gwilym's brassy address (in Medieval Welsh) to his own member … as my cue to meditate on some aspects of the testicles, surely a topic which is, even now, far from exhausted.'[18] The title might be as linguistically offensive as the contents are novel. The poem plays on all the multiple meanings of the titular word apart from sports – 'these love nuts, these eggs, these pills' (81) – in verses that testify to sexual liberalism and male reactions to the possible diagnosis of testicular cancer. Still, the poem also encompasses themes of justice and torture, in the sense of witness and ball-breaking, as the etymological quest reveals:

> the loss of Latin, the loss of a sense of the Latin root and stem
> that would help us weigh in on which came first – be it *testis* as 'witness'
> or *testis* as the 'ball' on which the oath was sworn. (84)

These 'ball-broodings' all take the form of sonnets in order to emphasise, if not the ideals of love and truth, then certainly the human virility and powers of endurance and resilience that might prove themselves when love and truth are violated. The variegated sonnet form also stresses Muldoon's intimate relations with a vital, mysterious, attractive and vital language. 'Balls' ranges from liberal lewdness to individual distress and an embrace of public concerns in lines that dwell on etymology and provide entertainment. The poem traverses the realms of disease, anamnesis and jurisprudence. Like *Maggot* and Muldoon's classic poem 'Quoof,' it is an attractive poem about the nature of poetry and language, a language that could be said to assist in changing the way we speak, and also the way we think.

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[18] Paul Muldoon, *When the Pie Was Opened* (Paris: Sylph Editions, 2008), 10.

'Nope' and 'Yup' are two other 'p@stmodernist' poems that conflate profound concerns with humorous ones. In their colloquial concision, these brief titles sound funny and the lexical layers of the title words imply the complex interface between the comic and the serious. As slang for 'no' and acronym for 'nowhere on planet earth,' 'Nope' posits the negative. As slang for 'yes' and acronym for 'young urban professional,' 'Yup' posits the positive. By its six repetitive negations – 'It's not,' 'It's not' … – 'Nope' seems to produce more hermeneutic possibility than the affirmative statements of 'Yup.' As a type of negational narrative 'Nope' always denies its own story and contents, and continuously provokes the question: So, what is this poem about, then? If the poem is 'not just another leper … making a case for Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus' (51), is it about general justice? And what might that be in today's state, or in the world? Is the poem about the disease of people, or of the narrator, whoever she or he might be? 'My own terms are so ill defined' (51). Or is that line a self-reflexive comment upon the government of language and the anatomy of poetry? The intratextual quality of the poem – 'Nope' relates to 'The Side Project' and to all the other poems on disease, justice and sea creatures in this collection – confirms its connectivity within the volume despite its self-effacing qualities. 'Nope' is not a poem about itself or ourselves only. Rather, it is about compassion for others and it is thus integrated with the other poems through the rhyming couplets of the genre of the sonnet and the scathing ironic cynicism of the final verse which declares: 'It's not just another leper who's lost the gift of pain.' 'Habeas Corpus,' Latin for 'you have your body,' one or perhaps *the* principle of law enforcement that the body is inviolate, extends in this poem from the controversial political sphere of international incarceration – the extraordinary rendition that the later poem of that title inverts – to health policies, and to the policies of the arts and language. The poem's title, form and its many negations – 'Nope,' 'It's not' – declare in very low-key language that the body politic is flawed, crippled and diseased.

Whereas 'Nope' tends to multiply questions and hermeneutic possibilities by negation, 'Yup' tends to reduce interpretation through affirmation. The poem, another version in a smaller format of the collection's 'The Humors of Hakone,' offers the story of 'a bottlenose dolphin' and 'a forensic entomologist' (77), which could obviously suggest two psychological aspects of the same yup as much as two different yuppies. In a poetic play upon commercial crime series such as CSI, the poem explores violations of law and personal psychology. Despite their apparent oppositions, 'Nope' and 'Yup' correspond with each other. They overlap in their exploration of personal and public themes and issues. They both play on creatures of the sea – 'mermaid' and 'porpoise' in 'Nope,' 'bottlenose dolphin' in 'Yup.' Both poems are typical Muldoonian sonnets. Both poems are extremely intratextual. Due to their opposition, not in spite of it, 'Nope' and 'Yup' correspond with each other. In their abnegation and affirmation, the two poems not only suggest opposing attitudes to life, they also display the grammar of disagreement. Beneath apparent oppositions, antagonistic attitudes and confrontational rhetoric, common points and similarities exist. On the level of syntax and grammar, 'Nope' and 'Yup' offer a challenge and suggest an alternative to divisive structures and rigid strictures of separation.

Even more so than the colloquial retort-based 'Yup' and 'Nope,' Muldoon presents in his p@stmodernist '@' verses based upon everyday communication. It makes sense that a poet who has made extensive use of single letters and intricate language in his poetry now predicates a poem upon one of the predominant signs of our times. The symbol that has almost required the status of a letter in the alphabet, and that appears as an almost unnoticed everyday event in most corners of the world, vouches for an accessibility that outstrips most metaphors of nature and urban life. New signs come with new fascinations. And new questions. In his poetic activation of @, primarily a written sign in the streams of technological communication from email to twitter, Muldoon pays tribute to, traces and plays with the linguistic sign of our technological age – a high-frequency phenomenon of language that largely goes unnoticed in the currents of daily exchange, almost like a Derridean exergue.[19] '@' twirls and swirls and reminds us of the Muldoonian fascination for signs, letters, language and poetry. @, as a sign of no fixed origin and without any particular status until very recently but which today appears ubiquitous, concretises recent philosophical critiques of Western structures of thought as innate, essential, self-evident and self-justifiable systems that have always been present and neutral: they have always been there, they are given, they are unchangeable. But such cognitive structures and thought systems are dependent upon everything the structure excludes, upon the other, the elsewhere and the contingent, and upon the medium of language through which they are sustained – the narrathanographic, the alterrative, the italicette and the quoofish in Muldoon's poetry. Post-structuralist critique from Foucault and Derrida and beyond has developed an awareness of the dangers, flaws and risks of systems, structures and language that do not take into account their own coming into being, their own exclusion of contending discourses, and their own mediation in language – the many hegemonic discourses that Muldoon's poetry refracts and/or posits itself against. Most tracing of even the most accepted, or perhaps especially the most accepted, signs, ideas, convictions and beliefs tend to end up at originary moments where the expected source proves split, fractured, diverse and complex, in Muldoonian poetics as much as post-structuralist philosophy. Today language, life and thinking without @ can hardly be imagined, at least not in affluent parts of the world. Yet the letter-like sign exists only outside the alphabet and the OED, and only came into its current status since the pioneering American programmer and primary originator of email, Roy Tomlinson, introduced the sign into, at the time, our newest technological means of communication in 1971: email. Tomlinson happened to have a keyboard which, unusually, included the @ 'poised above "P" on his Model 33 teletype,' and chose the least used symbol on his machine for his email system, 'probably saving it from going the way of the "cent" sign on computer keyboards.'[20] That Tomlinson allegedly composed his first email message, 'qwertyuiop,' from the top key row of his machine, the American QWERTY keyboard, is a story of origin that belongs to the alluring history of alphabetic arbitration – in language and Muldoon's poetics and much further afield. Alphabetic haphazardness, technological chance, apparent unintelligibility and its resemblance to the language of codes has brought the @ sign from obsolescence to omnipresence. That the new sign has already been inducted into the Museum of Modern Art for its 'elegance, economy, intellectual transparency and a sense of the possible future directions that are embedded in the arts of our time' – qualities that have undoubtedly also inspired Muldoon – indicate its status as already historical.[21] It is no wonder that a poet and creative writing professor of our postmodernist era with a propensity for the abstruse and aberrant aspects of language predicates a poem upon this symbol of current communication. Universally included in all computer keyboards and mobile displays universally known as the 'at sign' or 'commercial at' in the English language, the sign nevertheless takes its form from alphabetic compression and imaginative speculation, and gains meaning in etymology: the @-sign can only be traced to a number of fractured and haphazard sources. As a typographic ligature @ combines a and d or t into a single symbol (like æ combines a and e or the ampersand & combines e and t) to suggest the preposition at. Ligatures decreased drastically in the development from handwriting to print and IT, apart from the @ that became indispensable to the cost of most of the others, and that congealed into a logogram. According to most encyclopaedias and websites on the sign, this concentration of two letters into a new sign occurred intermittently in different places at different times – some of them still more mystic than rational – frequently for economic purposes of time and ink, as much as cost concerns and the priorities of commerce. One theory is that medieval monks, many of them likely to have been Irish, 'converted the Latin word for "toward" – *ad* – to "a" with the back part of the "d" as a tail.'[22] @ harbours within itself traces of the different, the excluded and the originary in its apparent neutrality and translucence. As a fascinating new sign of originary complexity, certainly flexible and capacious if not empty, the letter-constructed logogram has accumulated numerous different associations. Other languages appear to fill in the semantic void of the anaemic and analytical English term, the at sign. Appellations in other languages appear more evocative, and are obviously inspired by the graphics of the signifier itself: alpha swirl, ear, long-tailed a, monkey tail, snabel-a (elephant- or trunk-a), snail, strudel-a, tiny duck, teeny mouse, rose and worm. Whereas the mythology of trees might lie behind the early medieval Irish alphabet Ogham, the sign itself appears to suggest animations in the case of @. Muldoon's poem interacts creatively with the genesis, form and playfulness of the sign. The sign's disseminated aetiologies and its swirling signifying qualities infuse the form, motions and sentence of his poetic creation. @ can be regarded in its graphic manifestation as a forceful signifier that flings its energies centrifugally from its centre towards its margins. Similarly, the poem appears as a sonnet that has flung its stanzas out of kilter. Furthermore, the syntax appears to have lost its centre. All the similes – 'Like the whorl,' 'Like the ever-unfolding trunk,' 'Like the scroll-down tail,' 'Like the tapeworm' (74) – are written in dependent clauses that never arrive at their point of resolution or logical and grammatical conclusion. It is not that the centre cannot hold, the series of dependencies indicates that the sign never had a centre and that the references towards which it strives are numerous, uncertain and indecisive: 'Like the tapeworm swallowed by a hippie who once was fat / but is now kind of bummed out you've lost track of where she's at' (74). The poem starts and ends on the same difference, @ and at, with the irony that a poem apparently on the sign of communication and connection ends on separation and loss. The 'old hippie girlfriend' in the poem draws upon a long series of break-up poems in Muldoon's poetry, most noticeable in *Mules* and *Why Brwonlee Left*, but recalls most specifically the S — figure in 'Yarrow.' In '@,' their fall out and loss of relations are inscribed by all the lost letters of 'rlshps,' a truncated word of current digispeak that also indicates some of the fascinating new transformations, and symbolises the evident reductive tendencies of new media – the wayside shrines of information superhighways. '@,' in addition to its relations to a number of female partners in previous poems, relates as much to other language concept poems: the alphaphilia of 'The Plot' (*H*, 15), the B-series in 'Horse Latitudes' (*HL*, 3–21) and 'Plan B' and 'Ohrwurm' in this volume. In its IT focus it also anticipates 'Dirty Data' in the succeeding volume, *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*. Still, '@,' in all its sense of place specification, relates ambiguously to Muldoon's own place name poems. His early *dinnseanchas*, which include for example 'Macha' and 'Clonfeacle' in *New Weather*, tended to stretch the genre's rootedness in typographical features, traditional lore and Gaelic onomastics. Muldoon's poems supplemented those of Heaney, Montague and others in the same genre at the time. Poems such as 'The Electric Garden' and 'Easter Island' in the same volume can also be read within this interpretational framework. City poems such as 'Paris' (*M*, 40) and alterratives such as 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' and 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' have since extended, enriched and rendered more complex our view of the sense of place in his poetry.[23] '@' transports the challenging questions of place into virtual space. It also reminds us that many of the existential questions – on place, on language, on our relations to others, on how we relate to rapid transformations in and of our own condition – remain the same, in spite of the conditioning of our daily lives by new technology. '@' enacts, in its logogrammatic title, disseminated form, swirling syntax and separateness, the fractures, flaws and failings in the sign from which it takes its title and meanings. Muldoon's poem reveals that @ is a sign that has sublimated itself from its own deferral and difference into a neutral logogram in the technological means of communication of our age. His poem bears equally upon the media and information technology in which domain the sign is now chiefly used. IT and PCs have congealed, like @, into a neutral and largely unquestioned medium of communication that progressively eclipses former forms of correspondence and knowledge: hand-writing, print, books, libraries. Disintegration of relationships in the poem indicates how digital media threaten to decrease physical encounters through its endless possibilities of digital 'friendships.' Furthermore, Muldoon's reminder of the complexity of sign and digital media, as well as and his depiction of the disintegration of human relationships, also intimate the other sides of the net: its possibility for crime, ex-

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[19] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3–5.

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[20] F. William Allman, 'The Accidental History of the @ Symbol,' *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2012. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-accidental-history-of-the-symbol-18054936/, accessed 17 April 2019.

[21] Ibid.

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[22] Ibid.

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[23] For an excellent book on the importance of place in Muldoon's poetry, see Karhio, *'Slight Return': Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Place*. Karhio's theoretical discussion of Muldoon's poetry includes discerning analyses of 'Quoof,' 'Immram,' The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,' 'Horse Latitudes' and '@.' Some of the other titles that beg for more attention are 'The Electric Orchard,' 'The Big House,' 'Paris,' 'Armageddon, Armageddon,' 'The Geography Lesson,' 'Making the Move,' 'The Sightseers,' 'Ontario,' 'Meeting the British,' '7, Middagh Street,' 'Twice,' 'A Journey to Cracow,' 'The Sod Farm,' 'Wayside Shrines' 'At the Lab,' 'Rita Duffy: *Watchtower II*.'

ploitation and illegal and anti-democratic networking. From a wider perspective, this peculiar little poem implies how daily gadgets have been largely disconnected from the fraught and complex discourses to which they belong: globalism, internationalisation, capitalism, surveillance, freedom of speech, democracy. However, the poem and most likely its author too, are not technophobic. Although the poem addresses with irony and critique many of the contexts and discourses of the media to which the @ sign belongs, the poem also shows a fascination for the sign and for the new language and technology of which it is part. Perhaps Muldoon's little page worm will come to function as 'Pangur Ban' (the secular poem on scholarly pursuits and on finding the precise word by the Irish monk found as a gloss in the margins in his transcription of Latin holy texts in the ninth century, of which Muldoon offers his own version in 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' (*H*, 74)). Both Muldoon's poem '@' and the symbol @ work as apt and perspicacious signs for the broader post-structuralist scrutiny of seemingly self-evident structures that never question their own existence and their own coming into being. This seemingly innocuous sign also assists in setting out terms for a deeper understanding of language before and beyond usage and grammatical categories, and it also conditions our appreciation of the language of Muldoon's poetry.

Muldoon's language is also a poetic language. For all the theoretical discussions of poetic language from the new criticism of I.A. Richards via the communication theories of Roman Jakobson to the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, nobody who has ever read one of Muldoon's poems is in doubt about the difference between (his) poetic language and all other types of language.[24] His circulations of, around and from the @ sign illustrate this clearly. Muldoon's meditations on the margins of this sign differ distinctly from all definitions and expositions of the sign. Nevertheless, their poetic (Muldonic) form is clearly part of language, but it would give little syntactic cohesion or logical meaning in a scientific definition of the sign, or one made with reference to other discourses. Where '@' takes its poetic twirls from a sign, 'The Humors of Hakone' revolves around poetry. The poem is written as a posthumous retrospective in the vacuum left after the irrevocable act of murder. As the title suggests, these verses play on the four humours of Hippocrates' proto-psychological medicine (sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic) and on the setting of Japan. The killing of a buoyant being and spritely soul would infuriate anyone except, it seems, the deadpan investigator who exudes a gloomy sense of bleakness and despair. Japan is depicted as a bustling urban society, but also figures as the ultimate other to much of Western culture.[25] These verses also play on crime scene investigations – an update of the private eye genre that drives 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' (*Q*, 40–64) – a post-mortem to ascertain the cause of death by examining a murdered body. Unsurprisingly for a Muldoonian quest or crime tale, the mystery is not solved. In a final dissolution, recognizable from 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,' and a circular inconclusiveness, recognisable from 'Immram' (WBL, 38–47), the mystery ends without denouement or resolution – back at line one. Much of the knowledge and many of the insights are still startling, not least this one: the dead body in the murder investigation can be a poem as much as a young girl. The first and final sentences of this nine-episode forensic drama run:

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[24] I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1961 [1925]); Roman Jakobson, 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,' in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Michigan Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 350–378. See all of Derrida's essays in *Acts of Literature*, perhaps most specifically, 'The Law of Genre,' 221–251.

> A corduroy road over a quag had kept me on the straight and narrow.
> Now something was rising a stink.
> A poem decomposing around what looked like an arrow.
> Her stomach contents ink. (63)
> […]
> All I had to go on was a single maggot puparium
> to help me substantiate the date of a corduroy road over a quag. (71)

Who did it? Why? When? How? Who are the next of kin and mourners? How much evidence can be retrieved from what sources and what will the evidence tell us of the deceased's life? Will the murder ever be re-opened by a cold case unit? Will some of the evidence contribute to other cases or reform the methods of investigation? Parallels and points of comparison between the fates of murder victim and poem are many, and not without their own sense of humour. Muldoon's concept in this poem can be read as being in deadly contrast to all types of organicist poetics. Its ambience of dissolution, finality and hopelessness also countervails any highfalutin aspirations of writing for posterity – which will certainly be a reason for this poem's longevity. There is also the deep sense of a poet's or a reader's or a critic's bottomless despair at the murder of poetry. Epistemological quest, the search for knowledge in all its shapes and contours from detective narratives to philosophical investigations, has long been a template for literature, not least Muldoon's own, but a poem like 'The Humors of Hakone' reveals more than any the futility of knowledge in the face of ontological despair and human desolation: all the knowledge in the world will not bring the dead back to life. Already in 1987 Brian McHale asserted that 'the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*' and its primary question is 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?,' and that 'the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*' and its primary questions are: 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?'[26] 'The Humors of Hakone' is balanced between the worlds of mundane murder and spiritual liquidation. The setting is split between the doubly alienated forensic subculture of a foreign place, Japan, and the other world of poetry, the arts and philosophy. 'Humors' belong to both worlds. The persona acts and thinks much like a poet does – 'the body of a poem is no less sacred / than a temple with a banner gash // though both stink to high heaven' (68) – as a crime scene investigator: 'the potassium analysis of the gelatin / in the vitreous humor' (70). The different parts of the persona frequently overlap: 'Who knew the body is a footnote / to the loss of its own heat,' 'All I had to go on was the hunch that pupae would assail / the girl from the sticker-photo booth at the same rate as a poem cadaver,' 'To fix the time of death is hard // if not hopeless.' (67, 70, 71). Pathologists, prosodists and philosophers have a lot in common when it comes to anatomy, dissection and analysis. In fact, the investigations for evidence, for perpetrators and explanations in the unresolved case of the poem can be seen as a parable for the quest for sources and origins in language and life. In the criminal case, bodies, witnesses and investigation disintegrate and disappear, while in the broader domains of enquiry, for example in philology, biology and history, the foundations of the discipline can frequently only be traced back to its own dissolutions. The past, in whatever form it is pursued and scrutinised, does not always solve the case and any instinctive resort to the idea that it does so needs to be challenged. The past may even best be ignored, however morally incumbent and rationally justifiable recourse to the past might appear in certain predicaments. Language is split too, as letters, sounds, words, phrases and syntax refer to poetic interpretation and analysis as much as to police inquiry and autopsy reports. Repetitions and refrains in Muldoon's murder inquest reflect such optimistic hope and resigned reality. 'All I had to go on' alternates with 'it was far too late' to couple the inevitability of investigations into the past with the futility they sometimes yield. Such artificial roundels ring with the longevity of art, however much their circular technique also reinforces the poem's mood of stagnation and stasis. Other carefully constructed iterations insert moods of resistance, durability and survival into the poem's gravitational pull which tends towards death and dispiritedness. 'Who knew'-questions, always into etymology and specific language cases, insert a sense of creative encouragement and spiritual stimulation that counterbalances the pathological gloom of dejection. Such philological curiosity nevertheless also copies as much as it contends with the quest for clues. The quest for textual clues parallels the search for forensic evidence. Corpses appear in several poems. Textual clues are numerous. Solutions are few. Whereas the final poem was used to present a crescendo of preceding poems in earlier volumes, 'The Humors of Hakone' illustrates succinctly how poems situated elsewhere in individual volumes have increasingly taken on this cross-referentiality at the expense of the final long poem in recent volumes. A crime scene investigator appears as a young aspiring professional in 'Yup' a few pages further on: 'A forensic entomologist examines a corpse' (77). The cross-distribution of words and phrases provides new clues and insights. Worms, larvae, pupae, maggots and blowfly crawl and swarm in these stanzas too. The four humours concentrated in these verses appear separately in other poems. Sometimes such cross-references elevate the mood, but frequently they aggravate the atmosphere. They contribute to deeper understanding and further speculation, but not to any solution. Further intratextual investigations corroborate this tendency. Alliteration connects 'The Humors of Hakone' with 'Hopewell Haiku' in *Hay* in 'provocative propinquity' and 'felicitous fusions,' to take the cue from Muldoon himself.'[27] 'Narrow – stink – arrow – ink,' the rhyme words of the first four lines, connect the death of the poem in these verses to the death and the same rhyme words in the commemorative verses for Mary Farl Powers and Brigid Regan in 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow' in *The Annals of Chile* – poems that are very much still alive. Finally, Muldoon's multiple inquiry also relates ambiguously to a string of similar cases of Japanese influence in the tradition of Irish and Northern Irish poetry.[28] Will Muldoon's poem dispatch or continue this tradition? Questions continuously outweigh solutions. In 'The Humors of Hakone,' the pursuit of information does not lead to a solution in either of the worlds in which the persona plays a part. Uncertainty of which world the split persona is in, in which he achieves nothing, augments the poem's mood of world weariness, resignation and apathy. Language and reference in the poem accentuate undecidability. 'The Humours of Hakone' is a poem that lays bare, like a corpse upon a mortuary table, the epistemological futility and ontological uncertainty of our time.

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[25] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982 [1970]).

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[26] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 9–11.

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[27] Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Beasts*, xvi.

[28] For the Japanese dimension in Irish literature, see Irene de Angelis and Joseph Woods, eds., *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2007); Charles Ivan Armstrong, 'Drinking Tea, Drawing Ideograms and Making Waves: Pursuing the "Japanese Effect" in Irish Poetry,' in *Beyond Ireland: Encounters across Cultures*, ed. Hedda Friberg-Harnesk, Gerald Porter, and Joakim Wrethed (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 11–30; Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Suracuse University Press, 2004).

'Loss of Separation: A Companion' makes use of technological terminology and critical moments in communication and mass transportation to create a multilayered poem that dwells on the human predicament. The poem also exhibits intertextual tension and linguistic conceit. As a concept poem driven by language, this technique and strategy correspond with the techno-semiotics of '@' and the patho-metaphorics of 'The Humors of Hakone.' 'Loss of Separation' is a term from air traffic control that designates the loss of minimum distance between aircrafts, or other contraventions of the limits of space regulations. Such a loss may result in damage to aircraft, injury to passengers and personnel or downright collision with catastrophic results. The term is far more frequent in aviation and air traffic control than most people would like to think, and has become the situation of ultimate terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. That loss of separation, not loss of communication, exists as a lethal danger in transport and daily life runs contrary to standard lines of communication in aviation and space exploration, to common knowledge, and to ordinary language. 'Loss of Separation' sounds oxymoronic even before its constellated proximity in the title with 'Companion,' and before and beyond the title's reference to air traffic. To conceive of separation as vital to survival tends to strike some very inflammable points of rhetoric in relation to the discourses of multiculturalism, integration and global solidarity. One interpretation of the poem suggests the necessity of minimum distance as essential to companionship – in relations to others, to oneself, and to language – in order to avoid collision, implosion and self-sameness. Another interpretation, suggested by the second half of the title and the separation-induced conflicts and losses in the poem, implies that separation causes more damage and loss than companionship. The term 'companion' points as much to a fellow traveller, a comrade in arms, and a friend in both concrete and abstract terms, and to counterparts of all kinds, as much as to a manual, for example in air traffic control from which 'loss of separation' might be derived. A second sense of the word companion, as staircase or ladder connecting different decks and levels, contradicts directly the whole idea of 'loss of separation.' Interaction and movements between separate levels are also essential to damage and loss management. Levels of altitude, high speed, high risk, corridors of communication, control towers, pilots, passengers and goods – the main concepts of the poem – read like a manual in how the higher strata of society plan and control the separation of knowledge and information in society in ways that are habitually delimited in uncompanionable ways through separate corridors of information distribution, under labels of national security, business policy, levels of classified information, confidentiality, restricted and secret access to information, and how such piloting of society causes colossal damage, loss, conflict and catastrophe. Business policies, government media, private networks, intelligence bureaus, information agencies, information wars and wikileaks are some keywords which may help to unlock the poem. Although Muldoon's double-sided poem entertains the necessity of loss of separation that it simultaneously tends to criticise, the verses are inclined to favour companionship over separation, and to extend their sympathy to weaker groups and the individual who tend to carry the brunt of loss of separation policies. New, strange and unexpected kinds of communication and companionship can contribute to survival and the common good, as the excerpt in the poem from Pliny's *Natural History* on the cooperation between dolphins and humans indicates. A strong personal first-person voice in all stanzas recounts a narrative of personal loss as a result of changes in larger policies. Movements from international politics to domestic American policies in the first two stanzas of this sonnet turn into individual disempowerment and personal loss after the volta in line six. The persona evinces disillusionment with how the idealism of Kropotkin's 1902 essay *Mutual Aid*: *A Factor of Evolution* and the international cooperation in the founding of Israel have ended in the new state's blockade of Palestine. He also expresses disaffection as an assembly line worker, possibly a redundant one, in the high capital low wage car industry. His troubles are compounded by loose love relations and an increasing loss of self: 'I've completely lost the thread / and find myself asking a river / to run that by me one more time' (90). Although the persona suffers injury and loss from a continuous downward spiral caused mainly by forces out of his control, like a passenger on a plummeting plane or a survivor from a crash, there is still an inclement note in the final verses that he or she should distance him- or herself from these losses in order to go on. These multiple ambiguities of loss, separation and companionship also apply to the situation of poetics. Whether the poet fills the position of air traffic controller, pilot or passenger probably varies a lot in time and place, and also within the format of a single poem. Poetic flight is a standard manoeuvre, albeit this poem, just like 'The Humors of Hakone,' appears to gain height by its vital awareness of accidents, collisions, crashes and fatalities in poetic space. Perhaps the causes of death for the dead poem found in Japan can be traced in this one? Loss of separation in poetic space leads to interference, collision and truncated life, if any, for most poems, whereas a companion provides support and survival. These two weights seem to balance in equilibrium in 'Loss of Separation: A Companion.' Stanza three demonstrates loss of separation and companionship: 'where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim' are the exact same lines as all third stanzas in the sonnet series of Maggot.' The loss of separation in personal desire and amorous affairs leads to whimsical decisions and a string of companions. These verses also demonstrate the loss of separation in their compatibility and in their function as a bridge between the two poems written in sonnet form with thematic concerns of human and technological breakdown and crashes. 'A Humming Bird,' the next poem on 'Nora's first post-divorce Labor Day bash' (91), is certainly a companion piece in its engagement with themes of separation, loss, society, social chit-chat and flight communications of metaphorical humming birds, a species of birds which is, fittingly, designated in language by a troubling, a charm or a hovering of humming birds. Other possible companion poems would include 'A Collegelands Catechism' (MSG, 15) in its tension between elevation and gravitation, 'Ireland' (WBL, 19) in its evocation of the current nerve of terror and uncertainty in the metaphor of an assembly line product, and 'The Radio Horse' (*NW*, 21) in its far-reaching technological metaphoricity. There are many other Muldonic companions when it comes to turning the line and running the sentence, and when it comes to the sonnet form, to lexical intricacies, metaphorical intrigue and constellations of conceits. In the wider sphere of literary loss and filiation, perhaps this poem is the most burnished companion piece to the Metaphysical poetry that Muldoon revers:

> Donne I think most dramatically exemplifies Dr. Johnson's put down of the metaphysical conceit – taking heterogeneous ideas and "yoking them by violence together." Some version of a Metaphysical conceit is a common element in many of my poems, and Donne is probably my main influence.[29]

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[29] 'There were two books that I was reading in those years. Helen Gardner's edition of *The Metaphysical Poets* and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, a revised edition edited by Donald Hall and Michael Roberts. It came out in 1965, when I was about fourteen,' Muldoon says in the same interview. James S.F. Wilson, 'Paul Muldoon, the Art of Poetry,' *The Paris Review* 87, no. 169 (2004), https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/30/paul-muldoon-the-art-of-poetry-no-87-paul-muldoon, accessed 17 April 2019. 'Consider some of the great 17th-century poets who dealt with a vast information explosion. John Donne had to find a way of dealing with the high and the low. We can still learn from him.' Suzan Sherman, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon and Yusef Komunyaka,' *Bomb*, no. 65 (1998 Fall), 77. See also Dinitia Smith, 'Times Are Difficult, So Why Should the Poetry Be Easy?; Paul Muldoon Continues to Create by Lashing Outlandish Ideas Together,' *The New York Times*, 19November2002,http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/19/books/times-are-difficult-so-why-should-poetry-be-easy-paul-muldoon-continues-create.html, accessed 17 April 2019; Smith, 'Lunch with Paul Muldoon,' 75–94.

Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidden Mourning' and Muldoon's 'Loss of Separation: A Companion' traverse the centuries. They fly parallel in their title's prosodic pitch, syntactic similarity and sense of separation. Both titles evoke travel and overlapping conceits of proximity and distance. The thin line of minimum separation and the balance between loss and companionship, upon which these verses balance, uphold language too. Loss of separation and companionship appear, as Muldoon's poem reveals, to overlap and converge semantically. In phonology, minimal pairs are distinguished and prevented from collapsing into each other by subtle singular phenomena such as the phoneme, toneme or chroneme. Repetitions in Muldoon's poem of 'I used to think' and 'I used to think' and 'fight' and 'fight' illustrate clearly linguistic loss of separation. 'Fight' and 'right' illuminates a phonological minimal pair. 'First,' 'fight,' 'fin,' 'line,' 'lover,' 'river' present a linguistic run of minute, if not minimal, differentiation and pairs. '*Mutual Aid*' and 'blockade' sound very similar for all their difference. In fact, the poem's binary confusion and dependence on minimal linguistic difference can be regarded as a poetic enactment of all the Derridean dissemination, deconstruction, differentiation and deferral of meaning in the factoid *différance*: somewhere there is a line or a letter or a linguistic phenomenon that prevents loss of meaning.

Muldoon is an expert in construing poetry, art and meaning from signs, and that plays on minimal linguistic differences in language, for example in such poems as '@,' 'The Humors of Hakone,' 'Loss of Separation: A Companion,' 'Errata,' 'The Plot,' 'Quoof' and several others. These poems and the very title of this volume, *Maggot*, demonstrate that the critical divide between the 'slippery, virtuous game of words' or 'profound ethical consciousness' in the phrase of Kennedy-Andrews, is misconceived. The tendency to separate language from content appears as futile as separating melody from music, paint from painting, dancer from dance. Furthermore, playfulness and profundity often intermingle and are not always distinguishable. 'Plan B', the very first poem in *Maggot*, could be read as a direct response to this schismatic question of Muldoon as language gamer or serious poet that is posed by many critics: it is a poem that questions the question and reveals its flawed premises:

> On my own head be it if, after all the years of elocution and pianoforte,
> the idea that I may have veered
>
> away from the straight
> and the narrow of Brooklyn or Baltimore for a Baltic state
>
> is one at which, all things being equal, I would demur.
> A bit like Edward VII cocking his ear

> at the mention of Cork. Yet it seems I've managed nothing more
> than to have fetched up here. (3)

'Plan B' could be read as a self-questioning interrogation of the use and function of poetic language. Alphabetically B always follows A, plan B is always a back-up to plan A and thus may never be acted on – and whoever heard of a Beta male? As such, 'Plan B,' as the title suggests, signals a strong interest in all the versions and visions that did not acquire priority in the formation of ideology, history, religion, civilisation, identity and aesthetics, and, of course, in language and literature. Many of these grand themes are collated in the seven-page poem, and cannot be easily separated from each other. The persona assumes responsibility for his waywardness, his straying away from the straight and the narrow. This is an admission that is laden with the linguistic choices, the moral responsibility and the obligations of responsive protest which exist as part of his identity, where he has now 'fetched up.' The allusion to Edward the VII's visit to Cork in 1903 brings in the historical dimension of the problematic relations between England and Ireland. However, the B of the plan also emphasises the significance of the single letter, a well-known strategy in Muldoon's poetry that is also highlighted in this volume in such a poem as '@.' In 'Plan B,' the letter B is used to impose arbitrary universality in the case of 'Brooklyn', 'Baltimore' and 'Baltic'. In this assumed secondarity of B-places, it is significant, of course, that Cork, the only Irish city, starts with a C. The B here also connects this poem to the chain of B-poems in the previous collection *Horse Latitudes*. Like the battles and deadly disease that form the focus of that series, much of 'Plan B' also centres on totalitarian suppression and torture in astonishingly perfected forms of poetry – seven poems of four couplets with intricate pararhymes – and in a highly polished language. The strong sense of death and pain in these B-verses also extend to the alliteration and structure of Muldoon's eulogy for Seamus Heaney at the 1995 Nobel Laureate's funeral in 2013.[30] Muldoon can still rhyme 'a cat with a dog' and these verses serve up pairs of rhymes such as 'catchall' and 'cudgel', 'the KGB garotte' and 'the Scythian torc', 'cyanide' and 'paid' (6–7). The series of seven sections in the poem are interlinked through the repetition at the start of each new section of the final line of the preceding one, a bit of a B-choice in prosody that Muldoon favours a lot in this volume, a poetic technique which perhaps takes its cue from the repetitive structure of 'The Alphabet Calendar of Amergin,' by Amergin, the first poet of Ireland.[31] This aesthetic achievement begs the standard questions of play and profundity that Kennedy-Andrews summarises so concisely, to which the final lines of the seventh section provide one imaginative response:

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[30] Paul Muldoon, 'Seamus Heaney's Beauty,' *The New Yorker*, 1 September 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/seamus-heaneys-beauty, accessed 17 April 2019.

> I may have put
> myself above all those trampled underfoot,
>
> given my perfect deportment all those years I'd skim
> over the dying and the dead
>
> looking up to me as if I might at any moment succumb
> to the book balanced on my head. (9)

In this poignant confession of a poet's dilemma, the speaker evokes his lofty former self hemmed in between human concerns and literary ideals. The position is a difficult one to maintain, but a necessary one, as this poem and volume illustrate in their presentation of the tragic and the humorous in perfected forms and language. 'Plan B' is a poem that illustrates how language in Muldoon's poetry can hold a significance that surpasses popular critical discussions of play and profundity.

For all its profound political connotations, 'Extraordinary Rendition' is another poem that mines the possibilities of language to pinpoint Andrews' 'ethical consciousness'. The controversial practice of forced extradition, to which the title refers, has also been named 'torture by proxy' in the mass media, and has become an increased element in judicial and political discourses since the American war on terrorism and the Guantánamo controversy. But rendition also means translation and surrender, both in concrete and figurative senses, and Muldoon's poem tends to translate all the abstract rhetoric of law and politics into human terms of love and compassion, with lambent humour and erotic depth. Such an act of linguistic combat is certainly charged with political implications and ethical consciousness. The two mirroring sonnets in this poem account for the ecstatic union of two lovers who surrender themselves to each other, and who return their claims, gifts and belongings after the separation has taken place. This unexpected shift from the political implications of the title to the personal focus in the poem is one Muldoon's readers will recognise from previous poems such as 'The Mixed Marriage' and 'The Grand Conversation.' In 'Extraordinary Rendition' the concentration on the break-up of a personal union forefronts the human aspect that is often lost in judicial and political rhetoric. Furthermore, this personal focus augments the pain and tragedy of separation, whether it is caused by state-sponsored infringement of human rights or by other circumstances, as it can only be represented in very metaphorical language. The intimacy of their love and the torment of their separation are cast in geographical images and erotically evocative language, as if their passionate emotions and personal pain cannot be directly translated into precise words:

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[31] For a version of Amergin's poem and Muldoon's discussion of these verses, as well as his extremely performative exhibition of the anatomy of Irish writing, see Muldoon: *To Ireland, I*, 3–6.

> I gave you back my claim on the mining town
> and the rich vein we once worked,
> the tumble down
> from a sluice box that irked
>
> you so much, the narrow gauage
> that opened up to one and all
> when it ran out at the landing stage
> beyond the falls. (78)

'Extraordinary Rendition,' particularly in this poem, also evokes ideas of unusual extraction and exceptional extrication. Thus, the conceit of gold-digging fits perfectly. These verses function as a reminder of the fact that connotations of fortune-hunting women, self-serving men and opportunity-seeking immigrants have currently appropriated the term for what used to denote the operose activity of the most adventurous pioneers of the old American West. They also displace such material and meretricious ideas: the two lovers mine each other's bodies and soul, they keep their precious memory and remnants of love, but they return their estate, belongings and profits. This concentration on emotional investment, on passion and love, balances beautifully the idea of gold-diggers. This rendition of passion and love also counteracts the emotional constraints of the career advancement on the part of the young urban professional in the preceding 'Yup,' and the emotional spendthrifts in the succeeding 'The Fling.' These three poems also reflect upon poetry and language; upon studiously learning the trade, upon impulsively writing the occasional poem, and upon the hardships of delving into profound human concerns and finding the as yet unfound metaphors, conceits, words, forms, line and sentences for rendering such concerns in remarkable poems. 'Extraordinary Rendition,' in its position, its title, its use of resourceful language, and in its political implications and profound ethical consciousness, puts into focus the personal tragedy of extra-legal political actions, and the artistic challenges of presenting these in poetic language.

'Wayside Shrines,' the final poem in the volume, interweaves words, sounds, themes and techniques from most of the preceding poems in the volume. This accumulation is an habitual feature of all of Muldoon's poetry collections, but this finale in eleven clear-cut eleven-liners is less comprehensive and less complex than previous volume-ending crescendos. In *Maggot*, such techniques tend to be more evenly distributed across several poems, most notably in the title poem, but also several others, most in fact, from 'Plan B' to 'The Humors of Hakone' and 'The Side Project.' 'Wayside Shrines' could perhaps be described as the Route 66 or A1 *via dolorosa* or an elegy written in a roadside churchyard. Archetypes and perennial motifs of road and travel provide literary ground for Muldoon's poem, a poem that can certainly be seen as a mournful companion piece to Jack Kerouac's lively beat classic, *On the Road*. In a larger context 'Wayside Shrines' suggests a protest against the building of the new M3 in Ireland that destroyed some of the historical site of Tara in Ireland. Muldoon's poem commemorates, as the title indicates, the many accidental victims along a motorway, in history and in the present. These are the places and moments when maggots and flies are likely to reappear again and again. An earlier poem in the collection, 'The Sod Farm,' illustrates graphically one of the road casualties:

> Her car must have caught fire
> when she missed a turn
> or blew a tire
> the girl with the third-degree burns
>
> who slammed into a tree
> by the mist-shrouded sod farm.
> 40%. Third degree. (103)

'Wayside Shrines' ends on the fate of a prom queen, perhaps the same girl as in 'The Sod Farm.' 'yet the sudden failure of a break drum / extended her lease on Elysium' (120). Yet these eleven poems of eleven lines commemorate other lost lives too: 'piles of rock / marking the scene of a crash' (110), 'the beehive-hut episode' (112), 'early Irish monasticism' (117). Personal tragedy and public policies take another turn in these verses, towards the high number of people killed in road accidents, an obvious B-side of the political agenda in many places, not least during times of culture clashes in international politics. However, 'Wayside Shrines' also records its own way with form and language. In its unusual combination of eleven lines in eleven sections, the poem retains a strong drive to keep away from old and established forms of stanza composition. The remains from previous poems in the volume serve as shrines and commemorative pieces of times past. In its very current diction, this final poem also leaves by the wayside most archaic terms or etymologies. In themes, techniques, form and language, 'Wayside Shrines' keeps alive memory, poetry and language in its novel and experimental acts of commemoration and these stanzas do so by challenging the very forms and language that have traditionally been employed for commemorative purposes: 'whatever it means to commemorate' (112). The language of 'Wayside Shrines' indicates that sorrow and mourning might assume many different and yet undefined forms and articulations.

Maggot explores many sombre aspects of the human condition, and delves into ethical questions of both the humanistic and 'p@stmodernist' type – frequently by very defamiliarising metaphors and language. Among many imaginative possibilities, politicised discourses and ethical concerns, *Maggot* highlights a wriggling way with words and writing. Maggots are natural creatures in the processes of death and renewal – well-known challenges to creators of literature and language – and in relation to the critical question of playfulness and profundity in Muldoon's poetry. This volume frequently questions that very question. At least since Aristotle's *Poetics*, the comic and the entertaining have taken second place to the tragic and the serious, and language a tertiary position. Muldoon tends to reverse this order and to annul its distinctions. He is a poet who takes the comic and the humorous very seriously, and who reaches towards a deeper understanding of the complexity of the tragic and the serious. The language of Muldoon's poetry is essential to these excursions into the profound and the playful and the 'p@stmodernist'. After a century of linguistic turns from Saussure and Wittgenstein to Searle, Derrida and beyond, Muldoon's poetry is one that takes seriously the fact that language is unpredictable, troublesome, contradictory and forever shifting, and that the explorations of its disorderly phenomena bear upon social order, thought systems and the human condition.