

TO SING THE MAGIC WORDS THAT RAISE THE DEAD: FORM AND
ALLUSION IN PAUL MULDOON'S "INCANTATA"

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If I am host at last
It is of little more than my own past.
May others be at home in it.

These lines from James Merrill's poem, "A Tenancy" express with grace one of poetry's most profound yet most rare attractions: its ability to make a reader feel "at home" in a stranger's world. Poems that make use of unconventional forms, personal histories, and difficult allusions run the risk of alienating readers with their idiosyncrasies and obscurities. But poems that are able to retain their allusiveness and remain welcoming may achieve a relationship with the reader that is not unlike friendship. If Samuel Johnson is inherently correct to argue that "particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied," we must add that without these "particular manners" the charming quirks and tidbits that make us interesting as people would be lost in a life lived in dull generality (420).

Though it is now over a decade old "Incantata," Paul Muldoon's elegy from *The Annals of Chile* to the artist Mary Farl Powers, stands at the center of his poetic achievement in both critical recognition and general popularity. Seamus Heaney refers to the poem as "a cry of heartbreak and a virtuoso performance" (395). Since winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for *Moy Sand and Gravel*, Muldoon requires a reevaluation if only for the many new readers introduced to his poetry by this book and its publicity. Like so many readers, "Incantata" opened up Muldoon's multifaceted world to me. I first read the poem in the classroom. Despite its length and obscurity, the poem was well received by my fellow students. The voice felt immediate, its genre was familiar, and it was wild, scattered, and engagingly addictive, not unlike some reader's first experience of *The Waste Land* or, perhaps a better example, *Howl*. "Incantata" seemed to offer its own fully formulated world.

But for all readers who welcomed the poem's candor, many complained that "Incantata" was not up to the same rigorous poetic standards of Muldoon's earlier work.

Clair Wills, in her study *Reading Paul Muldoon*, relates Helen Vendler's dissatisfaction at the "apparent imbalance between emotion and poetic means" in "Incantata" (183). It is true that the poem is highly artificial, both in its form and in its varied, almost schizophrenic use of public and personal allusions. Although I understand Vendler's reservations, I take issue with her claim that this dissatisfaction is a fault in the poem, that the gap between form and allusion must be viewed negatively. Rather, Muldoon teeters on a dangerous line between an artificiality of form and allusion and a sense of real, grounded personal reflection. After all, the various registers of allusion grow out of the speaker's memory and associations related to his relationship with Mary Farl Powers. In this sense, they are only as random as the associations of one's enacting of grief are random. And, as Wills repeatedly points out, most of these allusions, such as the reoccurring presence of

Samuel Beckett, serve the poem's thematic purposes (182).

Vendler's reservations reflect a larger group dissatisfied with Muldoon's allusive and elusive technique in his poetry in general. Tim Kendall, in his study of Muldoon, recalls John Carey's blistering review of *Meeting the British* from the *Sunday Times* (London) in which Carey refers to Muldoon's "arcane, allusive poetry, packed to the gunwales with higher education" (20). Kendall himself entertains the notion that Muldoon may be "a poet's poet, innovative and technically flawless, but aloof from the common reader" (18). "Incantata" would then qualify for both reservations: it is highly erudite with 'higher education' and technically, and perhaps tonally, flawed. Why then, has this poem proven to be to so many readers an *in* to Muldoon? Kendall later addresses his own reservations:

"Incantata" has a higher prevalence of technical blemishes than readers of Muldoon's mature work are accustomed to expect. That does not, however, invalidate the poem's considerable achievement . . . "Incantata" is a new kind of poem for Muldoon — less polished, more openly emotional — where occasional lapses are an inevitable product of spontaneous overflow, and perhaps even a guarantee of authenticity: the poetry, almost, does not matter. (210)

But the poetry does distinctly matter. I am less inclined to see the poem as Muldoon's attempt at a kind of spontaneous or even confessional poetry than is Kendall. Reading Muldoon's other works should prepare the reader to look cautiously at a poetic stance that seems so forthright and unguarded. Instead, let's give Muldoon the benefit of the doubt and see if there are ways to read the poem in which its supposed oversights in tone, flaunted and allusive learning, and technical flaws actually contribute to the poem's emotional and intellectual success before we write them off as temporary lapses in judgment.

To begin with, the poem attempts a double cliché: to be an elegy and a cancer-poem. With these types of poems that carry so much baggage, Muldoon risks either repeating the stale tradition, or alienating his poem from that tradition because he attempts something too new or risky. The speaker of "Incantata," closely identifiable with Muldoon himself, is clearly aware of the danger of falling off the line into obscurity and obfuscation on one side and sentimentality and banality on the other. The poem's apparent artificiality of form and allusion draw attention to this danger in the way they require the reader to constantly make judgment calls that value each affected rhyme, each seemingly random or clever allusion. The reader's lack of comfort in the poem, her constant dissatisfaction at the poem's imbalance, is more than just a mirror of grief's psychology. It is ultimately a life-affirming act because it does not allow the reader to rest, to die, in any sense of comfort. The reader lives in the tension already explicit in the project of the elegy: how to bring back life using the static objects that are words.

This tension is immediately apparent in the poem's title. "Incantata" may be read as a portmanteau combining *incantation* with *cantata*. By blending two different types of vocal mediums together, Muldoon orchestrates tensions between the associations of each medium. An incantation, or spell, is a recitation of words believed to have magical properties. Specifically, an incantation usually refers to a spell either addressing a spirit or recited in order to call upon a spirit. A cantata is a choral composition resembling a

short oratorio. However, due in part to the voluminous output of Bach, the cantata has become inextricable from its use in religious worship where it most often presents the birth and resurrection of Christ. The Christmas and Easter cantatas are standard staples in the yearly calendars of churches of many denominations. The cantata resonates with celebration and spiritual rebirth. Thus, the poem's initial tension is between the occult and the sacred.

Both incantation and cantata work through repetition. It is the repetition, or chanting, of significant words that gives the incantation its magical properties. Similarly, the cantata requires the repetition of its text, usually scriptural, on which the composer develops musical phrases. Without this repetition, it is very difficult for an audience to follow the combination of text and music because the ear is being pulled in two different directions.

"Incantata" practically bursts with formal and thematic repetitions. The poem's central image, the potato print of the "Inca glyph for a mouth," is itself an artistic tool whose purpose is to produce multiple images (3-4). For Kendall, the potato-mouth is Muldoon's "personal mnemonic device" that stimulates memory's repetitions (212). The image repeats and is transformed as the poem develops. At one time the speaker wishes the mouth could speak from its "potato-face . . . unencumbered, from its long, low, mould-filled box" (100, 102-04). We cannot fail to imagine the box as Powers's coffin. And the cankered potato recalls Powers's face and body. Later, the speaker realizes that Powers would "be aghast / at the thought of [his] thinking [she] were some kind of ghost" because he wishes she could speak from the grave through the mouth of the potato (159-60). Powers's role as a visual artist is subsumed into the poem's structuring image. Yet this image resonates with private and public associations. While Muldoon's image comes out of the repetitions of his own private memory of Powers, few objects reverberate as strongly in Ireland's public history as the potato. Furthermore, the image of a mouth suggests its potential to repeat words over and over again, the essence of communication. This is particularly striking because, as an elegy, we know no more words will ever come from Powers's mouth. She has literally been taken out of life's repeating patterns.

The poem's formal structure, "the constant recurrence of the same verbal patterns and grammatical structures," mirrors the visual repetition of images and "gives the poem a magical 'incantatory' aspect" (Wills 181). "Incantata" is 360 lines of 45 eight-line stanzas, the first 42 of which are closed or end-stopped. Kendall traces the development of this "stadium stanza" as Muldoon refers to it, back to Cowley who invented it in "On the Death of Mr. William Harvey" (209-10). More famously, Wills reminds us that Yeats adapted this form in his elegy "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (183). Muldoon has chosen a verse form that emphasizes the repetition of elegiac themes. But it is in the poem's rhyme scheme that the incantatory aspect of the repetition is most clearly revealed.

Each eight-line stanza begins with two rhyming couplets followed by a quatrain with an embedded couplet (*aabbcdde*). We immediately hear the insistent repetition of sound: *a, a / b, b*. Muldoon heightens this sense by delaying the third rhyme over the quatrain. This disrupts our expectation allowing us to freshly hear the sound we have missed because it did not fall where we were lead to expect it would. The poem's first stanza even flirts with a triplet rhyme, "barrow," "Herrera," "Inca," as if to insist that we pay specific

attention to the poem's use of rhyme. After all, "Inca" rhymes with "Herrera" as much as it does with its intended rhyme "pink."

I am tempted to ask if this insistent, almost declamatory rhyming is in fact poetically powerful. It first strikes me as artificial. The rhymes are too close to each other. Muldoon's wild use of slant rhyme draws unnecessary attention to itself. It seems clever or academic. I question the appropriateness of tone for an elegy. However, this artificiality of rhyme is entirely to the point because it upsets the reader's ear. Muldoon is constantly asking the reader to follow his speaker through a jungle of aural repetitions. Where slant rhymes seem too distant in sound to actually work as rhymes, as in "widow" and "viduity" in the third stanza, Muldoon expects the reader to work to hear the similarities of sound, no matter how slight they may be. The reader in a real sense creates the rhymes. This is active reading. It is an action that requires the reader to notice that she is alive and doing something. In an elegy for a dead artist, the reader's act of creation only gives poignancy to the loss of Powers. This action also overcomes the principle danger in an elegy: overwhelming morbidity. The poem when read is an act of life.

Muldoon extends this sense of repetition by employing anaphora beginning in stanza 24. Anaphora is a rhythmic device that uses the repetitions of sound and sense to create a rhythm that builds continually upon itself. It is the rhythm of the poetic catalogue, the list. It is a rhythm whose intention is to suggest an inclusion of all life with details following details following details. Muldoon's catalogue is composed of prepositional phrases that modify his statement of loss in the 24th stanza: "That's all that's left of the voice of Enrico Caruso" (185). Caruso is an ideal choice to embody anaphora's sonic repetitions; he is the great voice. The prepositional phrase works particularly well as anaphora because it grammatically implies an extension of the statement. We are given more information, a list of greater and greater detail, and in the sense used in the poem, a catalogue of every particular detail present in the speaker's public and private memory. Not only is this thematically appropriate if the poem's purpose is to explore healing that "can be achieved through repetition," it also mirrors life's variety, life's sense of potential (Wills 181). This is simultaneously life-affirming and ironically pathetic. We as readers see the sheer multitude of life and find in its variety reason for living. However, we can never forget what has been lost, what will be lost in death.

Muldoon has literally sung the magic words that raise the dead through an overt attention to poetry's potential to repeat with meaning. For Wills, "Incantata" asks "at what point repetition becomes difference" and interprets this question in relation to aspects of fate, history, and personal identity (181-82). However, without an organizing structure (the incantation or cantata) in which to interpret the repetitions in the poem, "Incantata" can become unwieldy and monotonous. There is no apparent reason for repetition save perhaps its ability to entrance us out of our normal lives. In this sense I imagine the poem as a minimalist composition like something by Philip Glass. But then, the poem would in essence refuse to deal with the problem of death and grief. It would be an escape. However, with an organizing structure for the repetitions, these repetitions serve a cause greater than themselves: the praising and raising of the dead.

"Incantata" meditates on the existence of a universal order. Powers and the speaker argue such throughout the poem. Powers is an existential Scholastic who holds "forth on

[her] own version of Thomism, / her own *Summa / Theologiae* that in everything there is an order” (25-28). For Powers, the cantata plays out as the music of the spheres “in a great oratorio” (29). Yet Powers’s sense of order is “tempered by [Sartre’s] *La Nausée*” and her Thomas Aquinas (perhaps)/ Thomas à Becket is conflated with the other Beckett into “His Nibs Sam Bethicket” (30).

Conversely, the speaker is the voice of chaos and meaningless. His landscapes are the battlefields of lost causes: Chickamauga and Culloden (149). His companions are Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell, Hamm and Clov—the wandering population of Samuel Beckett’s universe. The speaker shares “a couple of jars” with Vladimir and Estragon who explain the “difference between *geantraï* and *suantraï*”: happy songs and lullabies (46, 50). As Wills points out, the reoccurring presence of Samuel Beckett forms a consistent thematic pattern in the poem (182). Beckett represents the absurd nature of death and grief. His characters, Krapp, Belqua, and such, are all, in Will’s words, “tragic figures, confronting a world bereft of any hope, let alone redemption” (182).

Beckett’s characters exist as comrades in the poem’s allusive landscape, and we are made to feel that the speaker is constantly living with them as real people. Later, he “[crouches] with Belacqua / and Lucky and Pozzo” in a museum “trying to make sense of the ‘quaquaqu’ / of that potato-mouth” (178-82). More explicitly, the speaker judges episodes of his life with Powers as being “worthy of Hamm and Clov” (88). These characters ingratiate themselves into “the poem’s obstinate recording of apparently trivial everyday details” (Wills 182). Muldoon is able to suggest a feeling of life lived in the presence of constant absurdity by interpolating these characters into the pattern of allusions in the poem. However, in as much as these characters exhibit an “existential stubbornness” and “[refuse] to give up their commitment to the routines and rituals of everyday life,” they provide examples of ways to go on in the face of meaninglessness and grief (182).

Furthermore, the speaker senses an internal tension in Powers’s “notion that nothing’s random, nothing arbitrary” because he recognizes free will. She was “determined to cut [herself] off in [her] prime / because [she felt] it was *pre-determined*” (170, 177-78). She refused conventional treatment and relied on an “infusion of haddock, hemlock, all the idle weeds” in part because of her conviction that all things happened for a reason (144). Yet it was her will, her refusal, and her determination that allowed the cancer to take hold. Ironically, Powers’s belief in order becomes a comfort in the face of death because she “simply wouldn’t relent / from [her] vision of a blind / watch-maker, of [her] fatal belief that fate / governs everything” (339-43). The pun on *fatal* and *fate* is heartbreaking. But if we are locked into this fate, it is “no more [so] than the map of Europe / can be redrawn” (345-46). It can be politically if not geographically redrawn (and is so, often). In other words, our ability to change or act in the face of fate’s predetermined order may be in how we label the situation, just as we label geographic areas countries.

This argument for order or chaos exists, like all arguments, in the liminal space between positions. The argument is active. Arguing means that neither party has yet to settle together on one conviction. In this sense, we say that an argument is *alive*. If Muldoon’s purpose in the elegy is to re-enact, or rather reanimate life, structuring the poem as an argument or debate thematically achieves this reanimation. However, we must always remember that the debate is theoretical: Powers is not actually alive to participate in the argument any longer. The debate exists and is recreated in the speaker’s

memory. But this too is entirely apt because it creates another layer of tension, unsettledness, and a liminal space between the actual argument and the speaker's remembrance of it. The poem knowingly fails to bring Powers's voice back to life in a way that corresponds to Muldoon's failure to bring Powers's body to life. There is, of course, also the tension between Muldoon's carefully orchestrated pattern of allusions to Beckett and the absurdity and meaninglessness those allusions represent. John Lyon, in his essay "'All That': Muldoon and the Vanity of Interpretation" focuses attention on the poem's use of the word *might* at its "dead centre" (117). Muldoon's attention to the ambiguous position of *might* evidences "the intolerable impasse of tragedy as inevitability, something inescapable, and tragedy as waste, something all too easily avoided" (Lyon 118).

The verse form of "Incantata's" also reflects this debate between order and chaos. We have previously examined the incantatory aspect of the form's repetition, but its self-conscious artificiality is a Rorschach test to determine the reader's own prejudice in the debate. The often awkward rhymes such as "such and breach" and "surely perish" in lines 139 and 140 pointed out by Kendall; the elaborate history of the form, and the form's sheer intricacy all draw attention to the poem's craft (210).

One may have one of two responses to this verse form: either she sees the chaos of the poem's content that the verse artificially tries to order, or she sees the craft as an intricate and elaborate response to that chaos. The emphasis is what is different between the two ways of reading the form. Where the form seems to fall apart, either in its flat lines or awkward rhymes, one may see the verse coming apart: its inappropriateness in an elegy. This may be an aspect of Vendler's reservations. Or the verse's artificiality may actually draw the reader's attention to the heroic nature of the poet's attempt—either the boy who sticks his finger in the dyke is a fool or a tragic hero. This difference may reflect what some call Romantic and Classical temperaments. More specifically, Muldoon's verse form strikes me as reflecting both sentiments simultaneously, somewhat like Byron in *Don Juan*, a writer Muldoon greatly admires.

Again, the debate between order and chaos that plays itself out in the verse ultimately produces a liminal space of its own. Muldoon shows profound awareness of poetry's capabilities. Poetry, unlike most other writing, is able to carry the burden of saying multiple things simultaneously through indirection, metaphor, understatement, figurative language, and other poetic devices. That "Incantata" is structured upon this principle should not surprise us. Rather, we should find the poem's liminal spaces as appropriate reflections and expressions of the multifaceted, conflicted nature of grief. As Matthew Campbell reminds us in his essay "Muldoon's Remains":

Muldoon rejects the equilibrium that consolation might bring, he simultaneously attempts to reject the prospect either of the persistence of memory as an inextinguishable immortality or the conservation of a world without change. (183)

We are left with an illustration of grief as a space that is between absolute living and absolute death. Grief is movement and self-conversation.

In the end, perhaps it was the love between Powers and the speaker that is the poem's ultimate liminal space. There are passages where the speaker doubts the validity of their affair: "even then it was clear I'd never be at the centre of your universe" (40). Or earlier in the stanza, Powers "[lets] slip [of a] secret amour / for a friend" of his (34-35). Their affair is best expressed in a memory where Powers and the speaker chase off a priest who

had “[inquired] about [their] ‘status’” (222). Their relationship falls between culturally accepted stations of courting and marriage. Love in memory is a tenuous state somewhere between “either/or neither/nor” (197).

Although both stations are generally associated with death, *elegy* and *eulogy* are unrelated. *Elegy* comes from the Greek, *elegos*: song, lament. *Eulogy*, a poem of praise, comes from the Greek *eulogia*: praise or blessing. This distinction is usefully kept in mind when one reads an elegy. Too often, we belabor elegies with the weight of a tradition that a single poem cannot possibly bear. Or worse—we mistake the so-called elegy for what it actually is, a eulogy. Eulogies are ubiquitous at funerals; elegies are more rare and perhaps more formally detached from the act of grief. Eulogies are familiar; elegies are strange. While elegies may contain the blessings associated with a eulogy, and vice-versa, in our current culture any public address at death deserves to be first analyzed as a eulogy before it is burdened with elegiac trappings, even if this address is a poem. This critical stance seems more justified and honest because it allows the poem to first reflect the actual rituals of our common lives. Elegies always have to find a way to avoid drowning in their own sorrow and mourning. Reading a poem as a eulogy necessarily answers this problem because a eulogy is derived out of the act of blessing. If a blessing is a consecration, then a eulogy ultimately consecrates the life in death. Eulogies make life holy.

“Incantata” benefits greatly from this distinction. For instance, reading the poem as a blessing justifies the sheer volume of allusion in the poem, public and private, that at first seems overwhelming and a bit self-indulgent. Of course, we must always remember that in the face of death any detail from life carries an increased significance because death has stopped the possibility of that person’s experiencing any of life’s trivial details anymore. This is essentially Wills’s reading: Muldoon’s preservation of “the details of Mary Powers’ tastes and habits might have some protective or sustaining value” (182). We may recall Derek Mahon’s “lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii” in his poem “In a Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” (54). In that poem, the apparently inserted, off-hand allusions do in fact make thematic sense if we read the speaker’s feelings of loss as extending to all of history and the world. It is a way into the psychology of the speaker because we cannot know his personal grief immediately; we can only understand it in relation to public grievances that are shared by the speaker and the reader. But this is more than an analogy of pain, familiar to us from mid-century American confessional poetry, where the poet’s personal pain is comparable to the public pain of the Jews during the Holocaust. Rather, the inclusion of these public details is actually a way of generalizing pain, evil, and grief so that the speaker is able to express these emotions *per se*, as they are in the abstract.

“Incantata” takes this allusive formulation to its extreme. We are not meant to care about each and every allusion in the way that the speaker himself cares about them. Rather, we witness one person’s overflow of the details of his personal life and the relationship of that personal life to the public sphere in which every individual participates. What at first exasperates us slowly becomes the very power of the poem. We should take pleasure in this exasperation because we see the poem as an overflow of life in response to death. Life’s public and private details become repeated musical phrases in the cantata; they become the magic words repeated in the incantation. More importantly, these details are consecrated through the act of blessing. They are made holy even if only made holy by

our memories. Muldoon responds to death by shouting life in all of its variety, in all of its complexities, both poignant and banal. We know what life has to offer and lament Powers's death all the more powerfully because of this loss.

It is the reader's position in the poem that most fully expresses this affirmation of life. How does one make sense of all the allusions? How does one resign oneself to the poem's apparent formal artificiality that is overtly self-referential? We as readers are forced to make constant critical judgments of the poem's artistic effectiveness. It grates on our nerves, does not seem willing to let us in. Yet our need constantly to ask questions of the poem, constantly to ask ourselves if we like the distance between the poem's heartfelt emotion and its artificiality of form and allusion, is in itself an act of life. This is inherently different from how Kendall views the project of the poem. For Kendall, "Incantata" "suggests that for everything destroyed, something — a 'monument', a nest, a golden dome, a poem or some other work of art — must be built" (213-14). But this is to focus attention on the poem as an object when one should focus attention on the act of reading the poem. Kendall's interpretation makes the poem a static thing—in a sense, dead. This interpretation also allows, if not requires, him to view awkward places in the poem as flaws. However, if we as readers find where the poem focuses our own attentions on the actions and judgments reading requires, then we will be reminded by the poem that we are alive. Moreover, our relationship with the poem is a living act like friendship. "Incantata" enacts its refusal to lie down in the face of death. We the readers are finally the ones who sing the magic words that raise the dead.

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