

PANGUR BÁN, TRANSLATION, POSTMODERNISM, PAUL MULDOON

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Abstract

«Pangur Bán» is probably the best known poem in Celtic studies, and a poem that tends to become increasingly more popular to audiences outside of Ireland. However, the anonymous, medieval poem has been cherished throughout history for a wide range of poetic, philosophical, intellectual and educational reasons. To inquire into the longevity and popularity of a marginal gloss on his cat by an Irish monk in a German monastery in the ninth century seems appropriate at a time when contemporary literature and applied hermeneutics of all kinds tend to dominate the literary discourses. This essay relates the historical poem to its many translations, for example by Paul Muldoon and Seamus Heaney, and current literary discourses. Why has this enigmatic *jeu d'esprit* been translated so frequently and why are these translations important? This essay argues that «Anonymous: Myself and Pangur», Muldoon's version of «Pangur Bán», can be read as a prismatic poem for postmodernist concerns, in his own poetry and in recent theories.

Key words: Paul Muldoon, Pangur Bán, translations, Celtic, Poetry, Ireland

Introduction: Muldoon and «Pangur Bán»

«Pangur Bán», the old Irish poem frequently known as «The Scholar and the Cat» written by an anonymous author in the ninth century, is given the place of pride as the first poem in *Early Irish Lyrics: Eight to Twelfth Century* by Gerard Murphy. «Irish poetry is unique in the Middle Ages in freshness of spirit and perfection of form», Murphy (1956, xiii) states manifestly. It still is, as the vital works of Nobel laureates and multi-prize-winning William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney illustrate so vividly. The medieval poem was written down by a monk in the ninth century in his native Gaelic tongue «alongside a Virgil commentary, examples of Greek paradigms, astronomical notes, and a selection of Latin hymns», according to Murphy's note (1956, 172) in the *Reichenau Primer*, which is now kept in Saint Paul's Abbey in Lavanttal in the Austrian state of Carinthia. Murphy bases his philological rendition of the poem upon Whitley Stokes and John Strachan's critical edition in *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus* in 1903. Several scholars (Tristram 1999, 503-29; Crane 2013, 11-24) have prepared the ground for the recurrent appreciation of the poem, and today the poem appears to be more alive than ever. Malcom MacLean and Theo Dorgan chose Murphy's translation for their astounding feat of letters and arts, *An Leabhar Mór, The Great Book of Gaelic* (2002, 44-5), frequently referred to as the *Book of Kells* for the twentieth century.

Translation, particularly from Irish, constitutes a significant drive in Paul Muldoon's poetry. He comments upon «his hunting down the precise word» for his translation of «Pangur Bán» in his interview, «A Cat to Catch a Mouse» (1998a, 14). Laura O'Connor delves into how Irish provides creative energies in his poetry in «The Bilingual Routes of Paul Muldoon / Pól Ó Maoldúin» (2011). David Wheatley also demonstrates how Muldoon's involvement with

Irish translations reaches far beyond the lexical pursuit in «The Aistriúchán Cloak: Paul Muldoon and the Irish Language» (2001). The Irish vocabulary frequently assumes presence in Muldoon's poems, and he draws upon Irish language and poetry models, for example the *deibhíde* prosody, in an advanced variety of manners. Muldoon also cooperates extensively with the Irish-writing poetry community, most notably Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Muldoon's translations, however, reach far beyond the Irish language, as Lars-Håkan Svensson and Rui Carvalho Homem establish so meticulously in their authoritative «Translation as Appropriation in the Work of Paul Muldoon» (2020) and *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland* (2009). Translation has, over the recent decades, also assumed a cognitive position in poetic and intellectual activity as creative confluence of divergent ideas. Michael Cronin's (2017, 2006, 2003, 1996) continuous commitment to the concept of translation provides the most prominent point of this position in Ireland.

This particular essay takes a closer look at how «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», Paul Muldoon's version of the old Irish *jeu d'esprit*, can be read as a prismatic poem for postmodernist concerns, of which translation makes up an integral part. The attention to this type of poetic *élan* has recently been supported by the seductive joy and spirit Rita Felski promotes in her post-critical ideas of reader enthusiasm in *Hooked* (2020). Furthermore, Nussbaum's attention to justice for animals (Nussbaum 2021; Sunstein and Nussbaum 2004) presides over parts of the essay. Consanguinity between the cleric and the cat appeals to Anthropocene conscientiousness, perhaps particularly so among the younger generations. In addition to philological inquiry and transference of ideas and images, translations also courts communication with the non-human, transmission of knowledge between generations and the accommodation of cultural difference. The process of translation involves a focus on language and text, several challenges to the origin, referentiality and transference of meaning as well as the dynamic accommodation of differences – characteristics that overlap with theories of postmodernism. The many motions and contexts of Muldoon's «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» can be read as a portal into postmodernist theories, and into Paul Muldoon's poetics.

«What is a 'Relevant' Translation?», the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2001) asks in his reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, his forceful analysis of encounters between individuals, and between literature, language, philosophy and translations. The philosopher's immersion in literature, *Acts of Literature* (1992), and his unflinching language focus and text-based critique of Western metaphysics, *Of Grammatology* (1976), run parallel to the Irish monk's playful, vernacular poem in the margin of his translation of holy texts while living in a monastery in central Europe. After all, Derrida traces many of his positions from the *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) just like many writers evolve parts of their writing from translation. The writing of the Irish monk and the French philosopher also point to characteristic postmodernist features in Paul Muldoon's *oeuvre*.

Postmodernism is, of course, an extremely complex, diffuse and controversial beast of a concept, as Terry Eagleton (1996) and Perry Anderson (1998) demonstrate in their opposing expositions of the phenomenon. In the myriads of intellectual discourses that defined the philosophical outlook and the text hermeneutics in the last decades of the previous century, some key tendencies in Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida's writing bear specifically upon this analysis of Muldoon's version of the anonymous medieval poem. Lyotard defines postmodernism as the current critique at all times of prevailing thought systems, and as the concurrent critical creativity which in the future develops the arts of the present and the past:

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. (...) What, then is postmodernism? (...) A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (...) *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*). (Lyotard 1979, 79-81)

According to this definition, the anonymous medieval poem «The Scholar and His Cat» is extremely postmodernist in its humorous and secular corrective to the serious and religious dogma of its own cloister context. Muldoon's version is also postmodernist in the way it recreates with novelty the medieval poem with distinct critical reactions to other translations, and to cognitive issues and social formations of his own time and place: Northern Ireland and Ireland in 1998.

Derrida's postmodernist thinking parallels Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives in his consistent skepticism of Western metaphysics. *Of Grammatology* searches for novel types of literature, *writing* in Derrida's terminology, that attempts to «overcome all technical and epistemological obstacles as well as all the theological impediments that have limited it hitherto» (1976, 4). He also writes in tandem with Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism as the nascent critique of the evolving present. Writing is predicated upon «the wanderings of a way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future» (1976, 4). Furthermore, his treatise on «such a science of writing», grammatology, argues throughout for «the de-construction of the transcendental signified» (1976, 4, 49). Literature, writing, and text always suggest to Derrida, as all his critical interpretation in *Acts of Literature* demonstrates, a unique possibility of critiquing in unprecedented and undefined ways the prevailing systems of cognition, conformity and consensus: «the subversion of logocentrism are announced better than elsewhere, today, in a certain sector and certain determined form of 'literary' practice» (1981, 11). Derrida's philosophy maintains an insistent attention to the powerful impact of language and literature upon ways of thinking; they often give shape and significance to thought and they are never mere means of communication. In many ways translation becomes a postmodernist paradigm for the deconstructions of the transcendental signified, of metaphysics and logocentrism. In more concrete terms, translations symbolize the shifting relations of literature and language to culture and meaning. «What is a 'Relevant' Translation?» Muldoon's translation of «The Scholar and the Cat» suggests some responses.

«Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» catches many of the postmodernist tendencies in Muldoon's poetics. Muldoon published his first poem in 1968, the year after he met Seamus Heaney, the first year of the Troubles and the time of the biblioblitz from the Parisian postmodernists, and his writing demonstrates frequently that he is well versed in postmodernist thinking and jargon.¹ «Signifump. Signifump. Signifump.» A poet and critic, Paul Muldoon, who writes such a wryly humorous three-word poem, «[Kristeva]», on one of the most famous post-structuralist feminists in a post-modernist mystery of Joycean proportions, *Madoc* (1990, 260), and who reviews Patricia Craig's *The Rattle of the North* as influenced by «the recent attempt to establish a post-Barthes, or 'Londonderridian' canon of Irish 'writing'» (1992, 22), is surely not unaware of postmodernist theories, despite, or perhaps because of, his recalcitrance against

¹ Robert Potts accounts for the first, and by now almost legendary, meeting between Muldoon and Heaney in «The Poet at Play» (2001). Derrida originally published *Of Grammatology* (1976), *Writing and Difference* (1978) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1973) in 1967. *Positions* (1981) was originally published in 1972.

being labelled by any poetic school or philosophical –ism.² For those who think of postmodernism in more intricate terms as a reaction to or trajectory from, or both, the aesthetic orientations of the period roughly between the turn of the century and 1945, Muldoon calls Yeats «*Il Duce of Drumcliffe*» (1994a, 145), and he won the T. S. Eliot Prize in 1994 for *The Annals of Chile*.³ The spirit, prosody and formal solutions of Yeats, Eliot and Joyce constitute very noticeable aspects of Muldoon’s oeuvre – metrics, forms and patterns that he frequently thwarts, undermines and invigorates. His translations from modernist poets are numerous, but Irish evidently holds a special, transformative position. He writes with great zeal and eloquence on the importance of translation to and in (his own) writing:

I’ve been fascinated by the art of translation since I was a teenager in Armagh, when my Irish teacher, Sean O’Baioill, encouraged me and my fellow students to submit for consideration by *The Irish Press* our renderings into English of Irish poems. The confidence he had in us, mere schoolboys, was transformative. It was as if we were ourselves translated into writerdom, with a sense that writing was, among other things, a job of journeywork for which we were eligible to apply. (Muldoon 2008, 9)

Muldoon, like Heaney and a wide range of recent writers and artists, contributes to keeping «Pangur Bán» alive, agile and attractive. The poem, in all its translations, versions and media dissemination, has continuously attracted the interest and compassion of ordinary readers for its pure delight and intellectual stimuli. Scholars, storytellers, philologists, poets and artists have also been attracted to the poem, both the process of translating and of reading the old verses, for educational, entertaining, lingual, political, poetic, creative and narrative reasons. Muldoon’s idiosyncratic variant of the medieval verses reveals ideas and intricacies that recent approaches have ignored. Muldoon, one of the many writers who agree with Murphy on the uniqueness of medieval Irish poetry, was, like so many others, hooked on the medieval poem and created his translation, «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», for his 1998 volume *Hay*. He, thus, contributes to the solid tradition of keeping the 1200-year-old poem alive. Muldoon presents a delightful feat of poetry:

Myself and Pangur, my white cat,
have much the same calling, in that
much as Pangur goes after mice
I go hunting for the precise

word. He and I are much the same
in that I’m gladly ‘lost to fame’
when on the Georgics, say, I’m bent
while he seems perfectly content

² «I’m a person who can see some value in a great many of the theories that come floating by. What I resist is the superimposing of any particular world picture, any kind of *ism*», Muldoon says in his interview with Lynn Keller (Muldoon 1994b, 8). Muldoon frequently distances himself in similar ways from confining theories and literary labels such as Martian, new narrative, new formalism and «Prac Crit». See his interviews with Kevin Smith (Muldoon 1991), Michael Donaghy (Muldoon 1985) and Wills, Jenkins and Lanchester (Muldoon 1987).

³ David Wheatley’s review of Muldoon’s *Bandanna* (1999) resounds Heaney’s early approval: «He has, in other words, the three things Eliot said only combine in the most important poets: abundance, variety and complete competence. Of how many other Irish poets can as much be said?»

with his lot. Life in the cloister
can't possibly lose its lustre
so long as there's some crucial point
with which he might by leaps and bounds

yet grapple, into which yet sink
our teeth. The bold Pangur will think
through mouse snagging much as I muse
on something naggingly abstruse,

then fix his clear, unflinching eye
on our lime-white cell wall, while I
focus, insofar as I can,
on the limits of what a man

may know. Something of his rapture
at his most recent mouse capture
I share when I, too, get to grips
with what has given me the slip.

And so we while away our whiles,
never cramping each other's styles
but practicing the noble arts
that so lift and lighten our hearts,

Pangur going in for the kill,
with all his customary skill
while I sharp-witted, swift, and sure
shed light on what had seemed obscure.

(Muldoon 1998b, 74-5)

The connection of the poet, like the medieval priest, to the cat is obvious: they are companions, they keep company, they share similarities, they offer each other comfort and pleasure. The cat manifests in the poem a very irreverent counterpoint to religious holiness and sanctimonious servitude for the scribe in the medieval verses, but Pangur and Paul are soul mates, thick as thieves, as their alliterative bonding indicates. Muldoon's translation also attracts attention to its own language; his verses offer novelties in syntax, metre and vocabulary in lieu of Derrida's linguistic cynosure and his emphasis on «determined form of 'literary' practice» (1981, 11). These creative solutions suggest new interpretations and bring into light aspects of the medieval poem that have often been ignored in the past. The many translations of the Celtic gloss, not least Muldoon's, testify to its many qualities and to its continuous attraction. Muldoon's translation of the poem starts smoothly. And abruptly. To introduce the second stanza with a stressed syllable and stopped sentence indicates the stumbling processes of translation in the

longer lines of phonology and syntax beyond the mere lexical chase. That the specific word that initiates this sentence is actually «word» shortlists the poem's linguistic concerns.

Muldoon's translation is also the only one that includes a direct reference to Virgil in the inclusion of his bucolic book *Georgics*. This reference charges Muldoon's poem with the sense of erudition of the old Irish poem written by a scholar in a monastery, and with an explicit contemporary sense of intertextuality that other translations lack. His translation extends the lines of literature back through the middle-ages to the old Roman classics, whereas most other versions tend to popularize the original poem's spirit, access and allusions. The reference also contributes to all the other connections between Virgil's works and Muldoon's poetry in *Hay*. Furthermore, Muldoon keeps the eight stanzas and rhyming couplets of the bardic tradition, and his feminine rhymes mirror the *deibhide* rhymes of the medieval poem: «cloister/lustre», «rapture/capture». «In Old Irish, syllabic verse reached great perfection», Thomas MacDonagh writes about this Irish mode in *Literature in Ireland* in 1916, and he continues to define the *deibhide* rhymes as lines that are «all of seven syllables, that the first and third end in monosyllables and the second and fourth, riming with them in couplets, in words of two syllables» (1996, 55). He gives «the first stanza of a poem written by a monk, a scribe, of his cat» (1996, 55) as his primary example. «The metre is *deibhide* (seven syllables in each line with an unstressed final syllable in *b* rhyming with a stressed final syllable in *a*, and an unstressed final syllable in *d* with a stressed final syllable in *c*). Alliteration is frequent», Murphy (1956, 172) explains of specificities in the old Irish version, specificities he largely ignores in his own translation. Muldoon's combination of mono- and bisyllabic rhymes also gravitates toward *deibhide* constructions: «bent/content» and «sure/obscure». The main alliteration is, of course, between the two companions, Paul and Pangur, and their common activity: «we while away our whiles». However, his octosyllabic metre extends the usual seven syllable lines, and his many enjambments and sudden front- or mid-stopped lines give an entirely new bouncy rhythm to older and other versions.

His chase for the exact word also results in inventive compounds, such as «mouse-snagging» and «mouse-capture»; several tri- and polysyllabic words, such as «perfectly», «naggingly», «unflinching» and «customary»; and some almost un-poetic terms in this medieval context, such as «abstruse», «customary» and «obscure». It is fair to say that Muldoon has revived the poem with a different rhythm, syntax and vocabulary that differ considerably from previous versions. These novelties may catch even better the erratic movements of the cat and poet in question. If a translation poses less challenge to imagination, it certainly increases the demands for linguistic ingenuity, formal innovation and contextual vibrancy. In its idiosyncratic poetics, Muldoon's «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» reveals the uniqueness of poetry in a religious domain and in the multilingual heritage of Irish language. Muldoon's recent translation also pays tribute to the important position of Irish scholars in European culture and to the Irish history of emigration and integration.⁴ And to a cat. And to previous translations.

Translations and conversations

Muldoon's «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» enters into conversation with a large number of translations of the medieval poem that exists today. Robin Flower's (1931, 129-30) version of the poem in the *Book of Kells*-museum at the Trinity University College in Dublin demonstrates

⁴ See Thomas Cahill's humanist, humorous and historical book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (1995).

the prominent position of the poem in Celtological studies today. He is by far also the originator of its current widespread appeal to a younger audience, as the 1995 Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, another translator of the medieval classic, points out:

For many years I have known by heart Robin Flower's version, which keeps the rhymed and endstopped movement of the seven-syllable lines, but changes the packed, donnish/monkish style of the original into something more like a children's poem, employing at once wily and willfully faux-naïf: 'I and Pangur Bán, my cat, / 'Tis a like task we are at..., 'Tis a merry thing to see / At our tasks how glad are we / When we sit at home and find / Entertainment of our mind,' and so on. (Heaney 2006b, 4)

The popularization of the medieval poem, not least to children, features as one prominent translation. Today the long-living «Pangur Bán» might be best known from Moore and Twomey's animated feature film, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), in which the cat appears on many occasions. The poem is also read aloud during the credits. To many readers, especially children and their parents and teachers, the poem is also well-known from different poetic versions and narrative embellishments in poetry anthologies for children (Heaney and Hughes 1982; Chapman 1986; Traynor 1997) and in Fay Sampson (2002) and Jo Ellen Bogart and Sidney Smith's books (2016). «Pangur Bán» clearly caters with fondness for children's fascination with cats. Iggy McGovern's also writes for children, but he responds to this endearment by emphasizing the cat's predation and animosity. Three of McGovern's twelve cat- and canon-conscious stanzas add antagonistic intertextuality to the affectionate implications of the medieval poem, a hostile note that hints to the fact that the anonymous medieval author might had to flee his monastery in Ireland due to Viking raids. Their animosity can also be seen as critique and recontextualization of the many comfy, cozy and infantile translation of the poem:

Call me Pangur Bán; this cat
knows exactly where it's at.
Never mind my sappy name;
violence is my favourite game.

That's my master large of girth,
copying for all he's worth,
thinks he's God's gift to the cat
corpulent upon the mat.

Would to God he'd get a life,
quit the Church and take a wife
start to act like a man,
take his cue from Pangur Bán.

(McGovern 2004, 90-1)

«Pangur Bán» obviously bounces with the appeal of William Blake's «The Tyger», and with the metamorphic quality of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. These transformations of the poem for a younger audience in a variety of media have probably already refuted Conor

McCarthy's comment that «the poem is probably not much known outside of Ireland» (2008, 169). Celia Keenan's claims seem closer to truth: «'Pangur Bán' has become the classic of Irish children's literature»; «'Pangur Bán' is now probably the single best-known Irish-language poem» (2013, 60, 73). The poem's didactic popularity today runs along lines of children's identification with pets, with their avidity for imaginative stories and mystery, and with their compassion for animal protection. The linguistic *élan*, syntactic solutions and erudite references of Muldoon's translation complements the many translations of the poem into childlike accessibility.

The recent emphasis on the poem's child-caring potential introduces a considerable change since Kuno Meyer enlisted the poem alongside the national culturalism of Yeats and the Irish Revival in the years preceding the Easter Rising (1916) and the War of Independence (1916-1921).⁵ Meyer rallies the medieval poem to the banner of Celtic specificity and independence:

Time and again in the course of their history the nations of the Western and Northern Europe have had to struggle hard for the preservation of their national life against a powerful denationalizing influence proceeding from Rome [...] It was only on the outskirts of the Continental world, and beyond the sway and influence of the Roman Empire, that some vigorous nations preserved their national institutions intact, and among them are only three whom letters reached early enough to leave behind some record of their pagan civilization in vernacular literature. These were the Irish, the Anglo-Saxons and, comparative latecomers, the Icelanders. (Meyer 1911, vii-viii)

Seamus Deane includes «Pangur Bán» for a similar agenda in *The Field Day Anthology* during the Troubles in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998. For all the deconstructive emphasis in the *Field Day Anthology*, an alert consciousness of colonization also characterizes Deane's introduction:

It is important to do this [the *Field Day Anthology*] now because the political crisis in Ireland, precipitated in 1968, but in gestation for many years before that date, has exposed the absence within the island of any system of cultural ascent that would effectively legitimize and secure the existing political arrangements. There has rarely been in Ireland any sustained coordination between prevailing cultural and political systems; indeed, when this has existed, its oppressive nature and function has always been visible. The fact that Ireland has been colonized through conquest and invasion several times and in several ways is obviously central to an explanation of this phenomenon. The island was conquered by pre-Christian invaders, Christian missionaries, the Normans, the pre-Reformation English, the Elizabethans, Cromwellians and by the Williamites. It was dominated by imperial England and its remains, to the present day, in thrall to the many forces, economic and political, that affect the United Kingdom in its post-imperial decline. (Deane 1991, xx)

«Pangur Bán», the anonymous Irish medieval *jeu d'esprit*, complies with Meyer and Deane's patriotic inclination and artistic *élan*, as the verses support the longevity of the Irish language, place themselves equivocally on the margins of Christian cloister culture, and continue the creativity and craft of bardic poetry. In a more current idiom, continuous new versions of the

⁵ «The Monk and his Pet Cat», Meyer's own translation of the Irish poem, is included in his anthology *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry* (1911, 81-82).

poem promulgate the image of Ireland as the green island of saints, scholars and sages, and as the hub of mystery, stories and imaginative power. Muldoon's translation of the poem acts ambivalently to this narrative of colonization and suppression. Although his revival of the poem cannot escape this long-standing tradition, the poem's gravitation towards linguistic intricacy, new idiom and literary reflection suggests that entrenched mentality and congealed rhetoric need to find new expression.

Many critics, academics and writers agree with Murphy's assessment on the vivacity and composition of Old and Middle Irish poetry and tend to find «Pangur Bán» the freshest of all the unique Irish poems in the medieval period. David A. King highlights many of the reasons for the 1200-year old poem's popularity today: «'Pangur Bán' endures because of the underlying connection between the human and the animal and the sheer mystery that surrounds the act of creation [...] the image of a scholar shrinking his responsibilities to seek pleasure in his own composition is universal» (2017). Muldoon continues this tradition. In addition to «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», he demonstrates his fascination with animals, often with linguistic *sprezzatura*, in the title of his children's books *The Last Thesaurus* (1995), *The Noctuary of Narcissus Batt* (1997b), *The Faber Book of Beasts* (1997a) and in his poetry volumes *Horse Latitudes* (2006b) and *Maggot* (2010). Naturally, his poetry teems with animal imagery. His pleasure in his own creative work shows incessantly in his serio-ludic puns and plays, in his neologisms, macaronic syntax and inquisitive grammar, and in his Houdinian attitude to genres, forms and conventions. «I have an overwhelming delight in the English language», «I just love it», Gaelic-competent Muldoon states ecstatically of English and *The Oxford English Dictionary* in «A Cat to Catch a Mouse» (1998a, 14). «Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket to Houdini», he says in an interview with Ian Kilroy (2003, 7). Translation appears, before and after his fervour for language and his preoccupation with form, as a fundamentally formative experience to his creativity. Literature, language and translation belong to Muldoon's «writerdom» (2008, 9).

Brian Friel's *Translations* (1981) and Field Day's tour with the play established this phenomenon of language as a template for cognitive, creative and cultural endeavour in Northern/Ireland in decades to come. Muldoon has translated Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's Gaelic poetry into English in *The Astrakhan Cloak* (Ni Dhomhnaill 1992) and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (Ni Dhomhnaill 2007). *The Birds* (1999) presents a Muldoonesque translation of Aristophanes's play, and his more than twelve volumes of poetry include several translations, for example «Rainer Marie Rilke: *Black Cat*» in *Hay* (76). His many ekphrastic poems and his joint artistic projects with painters, musicians and photographers extend his field of translations. Muldoon's translations serve a large number of points and purposes and «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» offers a delightful specimen.

«'Pangur Bán' has been a favourite point of reference with Irish writers of both languages», Daniela Theinová (2018, 23) argues. In comparison to the medieval poem and its many later translations, whether philological, popularized, patriotic or fanciful, Muldoon's «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» appears markedly different. First of all, Muldoon's translation is poetic, as opposed to the child-friendly and the patriotic renditions. His version observes with novelty the traditional forms of deibhide rhymes and alliteration and metric stringency that Murphy (1956, 172) emphasizes. Muldoon's translation of the poem nevertheless contributes critically and creatively to the solidaric rivalry of artistic achievement, together with Robin Flower's «Pangur Bán» (2012, 129-130), Frank O'Connor's «The Scholar and the Cat» (1959, 14-15), Eavan Boland's «From the Irish of Pangur Bán» (1995, 38), Proinsias

MacCana's «The Scholar and His Cat» (1991, 44), Seamus Heaney's «Pangur Bán» (2006b, 4), Eiléan Ni Chuilleanán's «Gloss/Clós/Glas» (2001, 46) and Paula Meehan's «Pangur Bán Reincarnate» (2009, 87). Muldoon's translation distinguishes itself from most of the other versions. «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», Muldoon's title, differs decidedly from all the others, and emphasizes the anonymity of the author in a manner that points to the importance of the text and the reader over that of the author.

This effect is enhanced by the incorporation of the writing and the reading subject in the title, «*Myself*», in the hermeneutic vacuum after the author's disappearance. All versions, except Boland's, operate with short sentences and end-stopped quatrains; Muldoon's offer long lines, enjambment and only two end-stopped quatrains. Each of these translations is conscious of rhyme. O'Connor, Heaney and Muldoon opt for rhyming couplets; MacCana and Boland for the alternate line rhyme – and they all struggle with the stressed/unstressed system of the medieval *deibhíde* rhyme. Heaney's version rings pitch-perfect with heptametre. O'Connor's also ticks along this metre. MacCana and Boland have liberated their verses from metrical constraint. Muldoon charges his translation with consistent iambic tetrametre. Seamus Heaney offers one reason for the constant translation of «Pangur Bán». He explains that the many poets translate this classic «not in order to outdo the previous versions, but simply to get a more exact and intimate grip on the canonical goods» (Heaney 2006a, 9). «What is a 'Relevant' Translation?» Derrida asks (2001). One response is that any Irish poet worth his language in the twentieth century needed to present his merits by translating the medieval poem, as a supplement to the continental tradition of writing a sonnet – a form in which Muldoon has excelled for years.

Pangur, poems, points and purposes

Within Muldoon's own poetic universe «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» serves several purposes. First of all, the cat slinks as a rare beast in Muldoon's poetry that is dominated by horses, birds and maritime animals. Muldoon's concern with cats, especially Pangur Bán in *Hay*, can be read as a contrast to his canine poems and as an extension of his long-hopping equestrian interest, or as another animal in his poetic zoo that also includes a hedgehog, birds, fish, otters, seals and a thesaurus. Nevertheless, «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» appears as a twin kitten with his translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's «Black Cat» on the next page in *Hay* (76). Muldoon seems to be as much inspired by these two particular poems on a cat, as a cat. Intertextuality trumps referentiality. The dual drives of scholarship and imagination, and the implications of translations from different times and places for a new context, trigger him as much as the endearing charms of cats. Yet Muldoon, obviously, like children, writers and scholars of all ages, identifies with the cat too. The cat, much revered and reviled in history, is here a charming creature of comparison and companionship.⁶ Cats are hard to hear and hard to herd and do not lead a dog's life. Muldoon, as well as the persona in the poem, identifies with the cat and respects its authority and independence: «He and I are much the same.» This type of identification of the writer with the feline creature is a standard point in all translations. However, the cat also moves with the autonomy, rhythms and stealth of poetry itself. The cat can be regarded as a metaphor for poetry, as much as a twin soul of the scholar. The feline creature is also an embodiment of translation. «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» evinces a surprisingly accessible, easy and wholesome side of Muldoon's art. As such, this poem could be read as an auto-

⁶ «Pangur Bán» can also be regarded as central to the canon of cat poetry together with Edward Lear's «The Owl and the Pussycat», W. B. Yeats' «The Cat and the Moon», Charles Baudelaire's «Cats», Stevie Smith's «The Galloping Cat», T. S. Eliot's cat poems, Emily Dickinson's «She sights a Bird – she chuckles» and Thomas Grey's «Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes».

corrective exercise and a critical riposte to all the critics that have upbraided him for complexity and inaccessibility, and as a signpost for the playful, accessible and demotic features that he later develops in his rock lyrics and vaudeville theatre.⁷ The cat and mouse play in the poem also reflects the relations between criticism and poetry.

Muldoon adds his version of «Pangur Bán» to a long list of translations. Thus, he participates in the sodality of Irish imagination and in the collegial rivalry of the poetic community at the time of its publication. The interrelations of Muldoon with the 1995 Nobel Laureate and *Beowulf* translator, Heaney, offers a special case. Their translations of «Pangur Bán» suggest yet another stepping-stone in the interpoetic relations between them. Conor McCarthy writes of Heaney and Muldoon:

The poem has often been translated; Heaney himself nominated it for inclusion in the canon-building collection of Irish and Scots Gaelic poetry, *An Leabhar Mòr*; and when we see in Paul Muldoon's 'Hopewell Haiku' sequence that the poet has adopted a wild cat, it's no surprise to find that the cat has been named Pangur Ban, for what else could an Irish poet call a cat? (McCarthy 2008, 169)

Muldoon's version of «Pangur Bán» adds another mutual point of creativity and critique between two of the most established figures on the contemporary arena of international poetry. Muldoon and Heaney have since 1968 acted like the scholar and the cat and the cat and the mouse in their creative and critical idiom as well as on the public arena, as so many critics (Moi 2020, 2007; Kennedy-Andrews 2006; Brearton 2003; Corcoran 1999) have pointed out. And it's frequently hard to tell who's the scholar and who's the cat and who's the mouse in their many intertextual exchanges. In the conversations of poetry in and around Belfast, Muldoon and Heaney's place of residence for many years, the poem can be read as a comment on Michael Longley's quip that Muldoon can rhyme a cat with a dog (Muldoon 1994c, 29; Haffenden 1981, 141). «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», like «Quoof» (Muldoon 1983, 17), is a lovely little beast in the language of Paul Muldoon's poetry that moves almost unnoticeably with postmodernist paws across the many fields of poetry, criticism and philology.

Translation and poetry, «a certain determined form of 'literary' practice» (Derrida 1981, 11), reach to the core of what language means and how it functions in the relations between nations, culture, text and people. The purposes and methods of how to exchange across history and geography ideas, thoughts, words, arts and acts between different parties who communicate by different means and often different ideology, cognitive structures, aesthetic principles and ways of living, share a lot of similarities with poetry itself, in addition to translations of poetry. In Northern Ireland acts of translation suggest very radical motions in a deeply divided society. Translation poses radical critique and transformation to the entrenched binarities of the divided society and their reigning metanarratives. To a large extent, poetry and the arts also constitute creative and critical alternatives to the religious dogma, ideological certainties, political rhetoric and sectarian slogans that have constructed the schism for considerable stretches of history.

Muldoon's translation of «Pangur Bán» enters into these realms of prevailing discourses and social formation. In its accent on linguistic intricacy, intertextual relations and contextual

⁷ Muldoon has written rock lyrics sung by Bruce Springsteen, Warren Zevon, The Handsome Family and his own bands Rackett and Rogue Oliphant (Muldoon 2006a, 2012, 2013, 2017b). Muldoon's Picnic, «a mixum-gatherum of poetry, prose and music» has performed regularly at the Irish Arts Center in New York and recently been on tour in Ireland, Scotland and England (Muldoon 2017a).

complexities, «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» differs from the position of the old Irish poem in current children's entertainment and from more patriotically inclined renditions. His version retains typical Irish qualities, such as the Irish language, the monastic tradition, the medieval culture, the bardic poetry and the nature associated with the green island of saints, scholars and sages. His linguistically intriguing translation of a mundane poem in a religious context written in Irish in a Latin and Greek Primer by an Irishman in exile in Europe illustrates lucidly to the present Northern Ireland that history, identity and society were always seminal with secular concerns, several languages, different cultures and with the exchange with other traditions, continents and people. Thus, Muldoon's poem, with all its charm, fun and humour, also entails a critique of the two dominant traditions in Northern Ireland, and of any society that bases itself more on the accepted models of the past than critical change for the future.

Muldoon's translations and poetry serve several crucial purposes in Northern Ireland. Just as the protean diversity of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) fractured the literary hegemony of the Irish Renaissance and envisioned a pluralistic modernity on the very brink of Irish independence, Muldoon's poetics questions contemporary poetic, personal and communal identities. But this deconstruction is not disintegration; on the contrary, it introduces new motions and opens up traditional thought systems and patriotic rhetoric on both sides of the divide. His combination of unexpected subject matter and deconstructive practices not only fractures the traditional identity of nation and poetry, it also examines how poetic structures are part of identity construction. In this process of forming future identities, his poetics reveals how the deconstruction of poetic, personal and national identities liberate the identity processes from present forms of foreclosure. Such poetics instigates new departures. «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*» illustrates that poetry, individuals, communities and nations have a plurality of identities that constantly remake themselves. Furthermore, Muldoon's internal dissemination of identities interacts with polemical exchange on the conceptualization of Northern Ireland in England, Europe and the wider world. Consequently, the deconstruction of poetic posture, stereotypical self-image and national unity invites revelations of stereotypes both from within and abroad. Northern Ireland is not simply England's, Ireland's or Europe's «other», but also an integral part of their artistic drive and social progress. Within a Northern Irish context, «Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*», *Hay*, and much of Muldoon's poetics participate in the complicated processes of forming a future for Northern Ireland in relations to the wider world. Such translations have significance for the crossings of cultures everywhere.

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