For 'text' read 'textile': Paul Muldoon's poetic weaving

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Muldoon's poetry has consistently made reference to textiles including fabrics such as burlap, canvas, calico, Carrickmacross lace, cheesecloth, corduroy, dimity, gossamer, muslin, polyester, silk, serge, and linen to name just a few. And, if the sheer range of fabrics could fill a draper's catalogue, then his poetry also contains numerous descriptions of textile items: tents become transformative spaces, silk parachutes mediate between heaven and earth, linen wings fail, burlap shrouds offer death and rebirth, handkerchiefs are stolen, shaken out, and unfurled in acts of surrender, lateen sails are stowed and hoisted, sheets soiled and bleached, blankets embroidered with disease, and linen becomes a symbol of politics and violence. Clothing, too, is presented in precise detail: hemlines rise, a linen shift marks the dividing line between innocence and sexual knowledge, gaudy sleeves and poetic lines fray, a keyhole dress is listened through, a donkey-jacket provides an intertextual nod to Muldoon's earlier collection, *Mules*, and an almost-naked stripper takes issue with Yeats.

How are we to interpret this plethora of textile images? Muldoon's highly allusive poetry has meant that his use of textile imagery has tended to be overlooked or considered simply as descriptive or decorative detail. However, a closer look at Muldoon's extensive use of fabric and clothing shows that textiles function metaphorically on a number of levels: historical, political, personal and poetic. In light of the fact that fabric can be found throughout Muldoon's poetic oeuvre, this article examines Muldoon's use of two textile metaphors – firstly, poetry as weaving, and secondly, the politics and poetics of flax and linen. Given that much of the critical debate surrounding Muldoon's poetry has focused on hermeneutics, a situation Muldoon has undoubtedly encouraged, the aim of this article is to return to what William Carlos Williams described as 'no ideas but in things'.¹ By looking at the textile 'things' in Muldoon's poetry some of the textual ideas that lie behind them will be unveiled. To this end, Muldoon's criticism and interviews are considered alongside intertextual references and detailed readings of two texts, 'Errata'² from the collection *Hay*, and 'Glad Rags',³ a prose poem written as part of a collaborative project with the Belfast-born artist, Rita Duffy.

The critical methodology draws on the principles of close reading but also recognises the limitations of a text-centred approach. For as Muldoon himself observes,

works of art do not spring fully formed from anybody's brow. They come from context. They come from social, cultural, historical contexts [...] to repeat, these poems do not come out of thin air [...] They come through one personality, at one point in history, in one culture, and all the rest.⁴

¹ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1995), 6.

² Paul Muldoon, 'Errata', *Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 445-6.

³ Paul Muldoon, 'Glad Rags', *Cloth: A Visual and Verbal Collaboration, Interrogating Contested Spaces in Post-Conflict Society*, eds. Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon (Portadown, Northern Ireland: Millennium Court Arts Centre, 2007), 14-46.

⁴ Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Contemporary Literature* 35.1 (1994): 19. Web. <http://www.english.wisc.edu/rlkeller/writing/interview_muldoon.pdf>. [Accessed 30 September 2015].

Taking its cue from Muldoon's own emphasis on context, this article will begin by considering the critical and intertextual contexts surrounding textiles in Muldoon. Placing Muldoon's readings of Yeats's and Ted Hughes's poetry alongside critical reception of his own poem, 'Errata', it will be argued that Muldoon's playful use of poetic form in 'Errata' presents Harold Bloom's theory of *The Anxiety of Influence* as a fabric of intertextual misreadings. Context is again considered in reference to 'Glad Rags', though here the focus is on the history and politics of weaving and linen in Northern Ireland. By examining the way the poem juxtaposes the politics of linen with sectarian violence as well as the connection it draws between linen and poetic line, this article posits the argument that Muldoon uses textiles as a metaphor for his own poetic practice.

While Muldoon has commended the work of Harold Bloom, he has also dismissed overly theoretical approaches to literary criticism, writing 'Let the theorists get over themselves. Let Barthes claim that there is no "father-author". Let Derrida proclaim against "phallogocentrism"'.⁵ Muldoon's antipathy towards the theories of Jacques Derrida belies the fact that their work shares a number of themes. Both are interested in language and etymology, both coin neologisms, and both co-authored textile-themed books: *Cloth*⁶ in the case of Muldoon and *Veils*⁷ for Derrida. Moreover, Derrida's work provides a useful framework for considering how context informs our understanding of poetic texts.

Commenting on the relationship of text to context Derrida writes, 'no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation'.⁸ Arguing that the difficulty is not simply a question of balancing text and context but of defining where a text ends and context begins, Derrida goes on to state that

What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [débordement] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of "text," of what I still call a "text," for strategic reasons, in part – a "text" that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.⁹

In the above description 'text' is defined not in terms of 'writing' but as 'a fabric of traces'. The shift from 'writing' to 'trace' allows Derrida to extend the notion of a 'text' to include not just written texts but any mark or trace left on a surface. It follows, therefore, that the traces of almost any human activity can be considered textual, including those left by the politics and production of linen in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, in extending the notion of 'text', the relationship between "text" and "context" becomes one of intertextuality. Here it is worth recalling the *OED* definition of context as 'the weaving together of words and sentences; construction of speech, literary composition'. In other words, "context" is not

⁵ Paul Muldoon, 'F W BATESON MEMORIAL LECTURE: Getting Round: Notes Towards an Ars Poetica', *Essays in Criticism*, XLVIII.2 (1998): 120. Web. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/XLVIII.2.107>>. [Accessed 27 September 2015].

⁶ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon.

⁷ Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Geoffrey Bennington, *Veils, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', *Deconstruction and Criticism*, trans. James Hulbert (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 81.

⁹ Derrida, 83–84.

only intertextual but also “textile”. It is against this backdrop that we shall consider how Muldoon’s poetry incorporates text, context and textiles in an intertextually woven ‘fabric of traces’.

Poetry as Weaving

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom writes, ‘to imagine after a poet is to learn his own metaphors for his acts of reading’¹⁰ and Muldoon’s inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry provides a good starting point to consider his own acts of reading. The subject of the lecture was Yeats’s ‘All Souls’ Night’, a poem Muldoon describes as

tailor-made for the occasion. I use the words “context” and “tailor-made” advisedly because, as we shall see, the poem turns out to be in part a shuttling, as it were, between the words “textual” and “textile,” [...] though neither appears in the poem. [...] It’s clear that Yeats was very conscious of an appropriateness of the slippage between these two words, “textual” and “textile,” conscious that they share the Latin root *texere*, “to weave”, just as he is very conscious of the word “line,” and that there is an etymological “line” running through the poem that is quite at one with, and mimetic of, its material. I’ll also be looking at other invisible threads through the poem.¹¹

Muldoon’s reading extends these ‘invisible threads’ to include, not only the etymology of ‘textual’ and ‘textile’, but also ‘line’ which has ‘its root in the word *linum*, meaning flax’.¹²

While Muldoon’s criticism has been viewed with scepticism by the critical establishment, his highly associative metaphors of reading can be used to throw light on Muldoon’s own metaphors of writing. This can be seen in the very visible threads connecting “textual” and “textile” in the long poem, ‘Sleeve Notes’ under the heading ‘Warren Zevon: *Excitable Boy*’:

[...]Warren Zevon, whose hymns
to booty, to beasts, to bimbos, boom boom,
are inextricably part of the warp and woof
of the wild and wicked poems in *Quoof*.¹³

At its simplest, weaving involves two interlacing threads: the warp or vertical axis, and the horizontal weft or woof. Commenting on ‘Sleeve Notes’, Adrian Grafe observes, ‘the expression “warp and woof” shows he [Muldoon] sees his poems as “texts”, having a consciously and rigorously organised or patterned texture, like woven cloth’.¹⁴ There are obvious parallels between the repeated motifs of a woven textile and the formal patterns and repetitions of a poetic text. Moreover, Muldoon himself has referred to poetic form as ‘like a piece of scaffolding or a loom. At the end of the day you can take the loom away, and

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 2nd edition), 93.

¹¹ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 7.

¹² Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 20.

¹³ Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 413.

¹⁴ Adrian Grafe, ‘The Poetic Voice And The Voice Of Popular Music In Poems By Philip Larkin, Hugo Williams And Paul Muldoon’, *Poétiques de la voix: (Angleterre, Irlande, États-Unis)*, ed. Pierre Iselin, *Sillages critiques* 7, (Paris: Presses de l’Univ. de Paris-Sorbonne, 2005), 151.

you're not conscious of the structure'.¹⁵ By paying attention to the poem's structure it will be seen that syntax and alliteration are conveyed by the horizontal lines, or 'woof', while the vertical axis, or 'warp', determines stanza length and end rhymes. In addition to highlighting the shared formal features of weaving and poetry, the term 'woof' is here connected, through the vertical warp's rhyme scheme, to Muldoon's earlier collection, *Quoof*. In other words, it is not only the poem's formal structure that gives it a textile quality, but also the network of intertextual threads connecting it to other works, in this case those by Muldoon himself and the singer/songwriter, Warren Zevon.

Muldoon has described the intertextual nature of poetry in the following terms, 'all poems [...] are in a dialogue with other works of art. That's obvious, I think'.¹⁶ The dialogue surrounding poetry as weaving can be traced back to early Greek poetry. For Homer, poetry was received directly from the Muse and for this reason bardic poetry could not be compared to the craft of the weaver. Nonetheless, Homer's descriptions of poetry and song, through images such as Calypso 'singing with her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her loom',¹⁷ laid 'the foundation for the lyric poets' description of their own webs of song'.¹⁸ Among these, the first lyric poet credited with using weaving as a metaphor for poetry is Sappho when she complains, 'I cannot weave my web, for I am overcome with desire for a boy' (1:127),¹⁹ although a more direct analogy can be found in Pindar's fourth *Nemean Ode*:

Weave out, sweet lyre, right now,
the beloved song with Lydian harmony.²⁰

As Scheid and Svenbro observe here 'the lyre is transformed into a loom, whose vertical warp corresponds to the vertical strings'.²¹

Later references to poetry and weaving include Jonathan Swift's 1721 epilogue, 'In the Behalf of the Distressed Weavers':

¹⁵ Michael Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon', *Chicago Review* 35.1 (1985): 80. Web. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/25305327>>. [Accessed 24 June 2013].

¹⁶ John Redmond, 'Paul Muldoon Interview with John Redmond', *Thumbscrew* 4 (Spring 1996). Web. <www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12522>. [Accessed 27 April 2013].

¹⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu, Dominic Rieu, and Peter Jones (London; New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), 65, *Literature Online* [accessed 22 February 2016].

¹⁸ Jane McIntosh Snyder, 'The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets', *The Classical Journal* 76.3 (1981): 194.

¹⁹ Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1988), 57.

²⁰ 'Pindar, Nemean, Nemean 4 For Timasarchus of Aegina Boys' Wrestling 473 B. C.', trans. Diane Arnson Svarlian, *Perseus Digital Library*, 1990. Web. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0162%3Abook%3DN.%3Apoem%3D4>>. [Accessed 30 December 2016].

²¹ John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 117.

But Wit and Weaving had the same beginning,
Pallas first taught[t] us Poetry and Spinning;²²

Composed for a benefit performance of *Hamlet* at the Theatre Royal in Dublin, the epilogue draws on Greek mythology, evoking Athena, the goddess of knowledge and crafts (particularly weaving). In Swift's epilogue, politics and myth are woven together in a gesture of solidarity towards Dublin's weavers who were experiencing hardship as a result of restrictions placed on the Irish woollen industry in favour of the English market. Or, in a more recent instance, textile metaphors for poetic craft can be found in Yeats's poem, 'Wisdom and Dreams'. Here, Yeats draws on both weaving and, through the image of the moon as a distaff, spinning as metaphors for poetic process:

I pray that I ever be weaving
 An intellectual tune,
 But weaving it out of threads
 From the distaff of the moon.²³

Yeats reiterates the association of text and textiles in 'The Symbolism of Poetry', referring to 'images that I was weaving into verse'.²⁴ Writing on the evolution of textile symbolism in Yeats's poetry, Richard Ellmann observes that in '1902, in a poem called "Adam's Curse", Yeats could still refer to his craft as "stitching and unstitching", but by 1910 he announced in "A Coat" that he had put aside his early conception of poetry as embroidery and henceforth would walk "naked"'.²⁵ For Ellmann, the textile imagery in Yeats's earlier poetry becomes superseded by another metaphor, that of the 'more violent art'²⁶ of the goldsmith.

Like Ellmann, Muldoon considers 'the two main metaphors for poetry-making used by Yeats [are] —poetry making as metal-working [...] and poetry as spinning and weaving'.²⁷ In his Oxford lecture on Ted Hughes's poem, 'The Literary Life', Muldoon finds a thread linking Hughes's images of 'phosphor-bronze wire', 'darning', 'bobbin', 'spindle', 'needle' and 'crewel-work flowers' and the metalwork and textile imagery in Yeats, and he goes on to state that

[i]n the midst of all these images of sewing and working at the loom, I'm struck by the fact that Hughes simply cannot bring himself to use that word "loom," though he comes close to it a little later on. In this instance of a phenomenon we might call "poetic recusancy," Hughes points to the subject of his poem [...] That subject is less "The Literary Life" than literary influence, and the combination of the unspoken "loom" and the "crewel-work flowers" are clear indications of Hughes's acknowledgment of a near version of the word "loom." I refer to Harold Bloom, the author of *The Anxiety of Influence*, his great 1973 study which remains one of the

²² Jonathan Swift 1667-1745, 'AN EPILOGUE, To Be Spoke at the THEATRE-ROYAL This Present Saturday Being April the 1st. In the Behalf of the Distressed Weavers', *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), 273, *Literature Online*.

²³ William Butler Yeats, 'Wisdom and Dreams', in *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997, 2nd edition), 542, *Literature Online* [accessed 1 January 2017].

²⁴ William Butler Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', *The Dome*, Vol. 6, February-April 1900, (London, 1900), 254.

²⁵ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, (London: Macmillan, 1954), 38.

²⁶ Ellmann, 38.

²⁷ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 41.

most illuminating contributions to our understanding of the works of poets and poetry.²⁸

In the introduction to *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom presents the thesis that poetic history 'is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves'.²⁹ In a movement Bloom calls '*clinamen*', the strong poet or 'ephebe' misreads the work of the 'precursor' poet in order to 'correct' the perceived 'errors' of his or her forebears. In Muldoon's Bloomian reading of 'The Literary Life', Hughes is presented in the role of 'ephebe' to his literary 'precursors', Yeats and Marianne Moore. And, while it could be argued that Muldoon's reading of 'The Literary Life' is itself an example of poetic 'misprision', what is of interest is Muldoon's association of poetic influence, Harold Bloom and the (serendipitously rhyming) word 'loom'. This raises the question of whether a similar association can be found in Muldoon's poetry.

Looming Influences

As Fran Brearton observes, a poem that 'suggests one way to "read" the Muldoon *oeuvre*'³⁰ is 'Errata', which begins

For "Antrim" read "Armagh."
For "mother" read "other."
For "harm" read "farm."
For "feather" read "father."

'Errata' is a list poem made up of eight four-line stanzas all of which are structured around the repeated 'For "[...]" read "[...]"' motif. As we know, 'errata' refers to the corrected errors of a published text and among the poem's errata is the playful, 'For "ludic" read "lucid."'. Noting the poem's game-like quality John Kerrigan states that 'much of the fun lies in working out how the mistakes were made, whether they can be found in Muldoon's own work, and whether they were mistakes when written or have subsequently become so'.³¹ In other words, are they mistakes or simply revisions?

However, not all critics have taken up 'Errata's invitation to play with enthusiasm. For John Lyon:

Some of [the poem's] errata are blush-making love letters to the current critical establishment: 'For "mother" read "other"'; 'For "religion" read "region"' (P, 445). Some trail the coat of Joycean influence: 'For "loom" read "bloom"' (P, 446)... and 'gloom'? All are invitations to unconstrained critical ingenuity.³²

²⁸ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 41.

²⁹ Bloom, 5.

³⁰ Fran Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, eds. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 45.

³¹ John Kerrigan, 'Paul Muldoon's Transits: Muddling Through after Madoc', *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, eds. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 137.

³² John Lyon, "'All That': Muldoon and the Vanity of Interpretation', *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, eds. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 122.

Referring to the poem's final line, 'For "loom" read "bloom."', Lyon sees an allusion to Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce's, *Ulysses*. As he rightly observes, this provides no obvious reason for the pairing of 'loom' and 'bloom' beyond 'the overt adumbration of the rhyming method of heterogeneous [sic] yoking'.³³ In Lyon's reading, 'Errata' is simply a list of paired rhymes with no connection between the poem's form and its subject. This leads him to the more general conclusion that 'any confidence that Muldoon's formal patternings can simply be read off as meanings is misplaced. It is unlikely that any equation of form and content, beyond the most tentative and modest, can be persuasively construed'.³⁴ However, there is perhaps rhyme *and* reason in Muldoon's poetic method.

Commenting on 'Errata's final line, 'For "loom" read "bloom."', John Kerrigan considers the poem 'just stops, on an alternate par rhyme but with no demonstrable conclusion'.³⁵ However, it can also be argued that the final line is an acknowledgment of the poem's subject. For, as his analysis of Hughes's 'The Literary Life' makes clear, Muldoon sees Harold Bloom's name to be 'a near version of the word "loom."'.³⁶ And, as we have also seen, Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* presents poetic history as a history of intertextual misreading. Thus, when John Kerrigan wonders whether 'Errata' presents 'poetry [as] a medium of mistakes'³⁷ prompting the question, 'Is there no end to error?',³⁸ the Bloomian response must be "no". *Clinamen*, or poetic misprision, is the first movement in *The Anxiety of Influence* whereby the words of the precursor, while not at fault themselves, are deemed to be so by the 'ephebe'. This leads to the second movement, *Tessera*, in which the 'ephebe' 'corrects' the perceived errors in the precursor's text. Similarly, the 'mistakes' in 'Errata' can be seen, not as misprints of some original, but as misreadings. In other words, 'Errata' effectuates at a lexical level the same movement Bloom identifies as occurring between poets. Therefore, by yoking together 'bloom' and 'loom' Muldoon manages to refer to both Harold Bloom as 'a near version of the word "loom"'³⁹ and poetic misprision as a web of intertextual misquotations. Furthermore, Muldoon says as much in an aside in the final poem from *Hay*, 'The Bangle (Slight Return)', where, returning to both the form and the subject of 'Errata', he writes, "'For 'errata,'" Virgil smiled, "read 'corrigenda.'".⁴⁰ Or, put another way, for 'corrigenda' read 'Tessera'.

Bloom's theory of poetic influence consists of six movements the last of which is *Apophrades*. Here the 'ephebe'

achieve[s] a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time is almost overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*.⁴¹

The poet most frequently cast in the role of 'precursor' to Muldoon's 'ephebe' is Seamus Heaney. At the eightieth birthday celebration of writer, Benedict Kiely in 1999, Heaney

³³ Lyon, 122.

³⁴ Lyon, 123.

³⁵ Kerrigan, 139.

³⁶ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 41.

³⁷ Kerrigan, 137.

³⁸ Kerrigan, 138.

³⁹ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 41.

⁴⁰ Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 475.

⁴¹ Bloom, p. 141.

read his own playful version of 'Errata' entitled 'Errata for BK'. Acknowledging the original template for the poem, Heaney forwarded a copy to Muldoon who promptly replied:

A funny thing happened on the plane the next day. A stewardess came up to me and said, "Are you Seamus Heaney?" What can it mean? Is Bloom (Harold) right after all? Or was she at Ben Kiely's eightieth? The poem was great fun.⁴²

Whether Heaney was consciously parodying the final movement in Bloom's theory by imitating Muldoon's poem is not clear. However, Muldoon's playful linking of Heaney, Bloom and 'Errata' suggests there may be a connection. In this context perhaps 'ludic' really does mean 'lucid' after all.

As well as being a 'near version' of 'Bloom', there are formal reasons for Muldoon to include 'loom' in a poem about poetic process. Referring to the highly structured poems in the collection, John Kerrigan speculates as to whether 'Errata' 'might be related to *Hay's* experiments with concrete poetry'.⁴³ As we know, concrete poetry is based on the notion of isomorphism whereby the shape and meaning of a poem are self-identical. Contrasting the 'interlingual puns'⁴⁴ framed by two other concrete poems from *Hay*, 'The Plot' and 'A Half-Door Near Cluny', Kerrigan finds 'Errata' 'obviously not so pictorial, and it makes an issue of rhyme, but it still presents language as writing'.⁴⁵ Admittedly 'The Plot'⁴⁶ and 'A Half-Door Near Cluny'⁴⁷ are more obviously concrete poems, announcing their subjects in their respective titles and in the images formed by the poems. However, in order to understand how 'Errata' functions as a 'concrete' poem as well as a spoken one, we need to return to the earlier quotation by Muldoon in which poetic form was 'like a piece of scaffolding or a loom'.⁴⁸ If poetic form is a loom then logically the poem it produces is a woven text. 'Errata's repetition of 'For "[...]" read "[...]"', creates a regular pattern through the stitch of quotation marks and interweaving of similar-looking words along the horizontal axis or "weft". The vertical "warp" produces regular four-line stanzas, mixing rhyme and half-rhyme. Visually therefore, the poem represents a woven text whose poetic form is structured around the 'loom' of the final line. Moreover, the poem's repetitive rhythms and syntax could be considered as imitating the repetitive sounds of a mechanical loom. In this way, 'Errata' creates its own "interlingual pun", a visual play on the notion of text as *texere*, poetic form as a loom, and the Bloomian notion of poetry as a network of intertextual misreading. In this context, "concrete poem" is perhaps a misnomer and 'Errata' might be more accurately described as a "textile" poem.

For Fran Brearton, Muldoon's 'habitual self-consciousness about literary-critical approaches to his work [...] works against Bloom's own portentousness and dubious gender politics to suggest that the theory itself is being as much parodied as played out'.⁴⁹ Certainly

⁴² Paul Muldoon, Extract from typed Letter addressed to Seamus Heaney, dated November 12, 1999, 'Paul Muldoon Papers, 1939-2016', Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta GA.

⁴³ Kerrigan, 138.

⁴⁴ Kerrigan, 138.

⁴⁵ Kerrigan, 138.

⁴⁶ Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 402.

⁴⁷ Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 455.

⁴⁸ Donaghy, 80.

⁴⁹ Brearton, 51.

'Errata' would appear to exemplify this idea of Muldoon playfully (self-)parodying Bloom's theory. For while the poem's subject is Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', its treatment precludes any application of Bloom's theory to Muldoon's own anxieties of poetic influence. Other than 'Virgil' (who also features in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)') and 'Steinbeck' (who doesn't), its references, cannot be considered literary influences. Instead, Muldoon's extra-literary influences include places and relatives – influences that loom elsewhere in his poetry. And, if at times 'Errata' resembles a 'family romance',⁵⁰ then this is perhaps because Bloom borrows the phrase from Freud to describe intra-poetic, rather than family, relations.

Referring to Muldoon's intra-poetic family, Fran Brearton makes the point that Muldoon has habitually been cast in the role of 'ephebe' with Heaney as the 'precursor' poet, despite the fact that he 'dedicated his first collection to "my Fathers and Mothers"'. In so doing he acknowledges the 'parental' role of various critics and writers in his development'.⁵¹ What we see in 'Errata' is not only an acknowledgement of familial and contextual influences that form part of the fabric of Muldoon's poetry, but also an acknowledgment of the 'looming' presence of one of his critical forbears, Harold Bloom.

The Politics and Poetics of Linen

A poem in which Muldoon shows no 'poetic recusancy' towards his poetic (or indeed, genetic) forebears, is the prose poem, 'Glad Rags'. The poem was written in collaboration with the Belfast-born artist, Rita Duffy, after she had been commissioned 'to create paintings revolving around this banner: "Interrogating Contested spaces in Post-conflict society"'.⁵² Duffy sent Muldoon some of the early images, following which 'he wrote the poem/narratives. [...] It was quite personal from his perspective and the exhibition first happened in Portadown which is where he is from'.⁵³ Presented at the Millennium Court Art Centre in 2007, the exhibition and accompanying book, *Cloth: A Visual and Verbal Collaboration*,⁵⁴ featured Duffy's collection 'Cloth', and Muldoon's prose poem, 'Glad Rags'. As both titles suggest, the exhibition explored a textile theme and among Duffy's images are suspended coats, collars, shirts, flak jackets, lawyers' gowns, priests' robes as well as crumpled handkerchiefs, lace tablecloths and other items of household linen. Devoid of any human figures, the textile figures bear the ghost-like forms of their absent owners. In contrast to Duffy's anonymous textile figures, the narrative thread of 'Glad Rags' weaves personal anecdote, etymology, and memories of the local linen industry to examine the fabric's role in cultural, political and literary landscapes of Ireland. These include an early childhood experience:

⁵⁰ Bloom, 8.

⁵¹ Brearton, 52.

⁵² Alexandra Tavvry, 'Interview of Rita Duffy – Belfast Studio – Friday, 6th February 2009.', 1. Web. <http://ritaduffystudio.com/pdf/interview_1.pdf>. [Accessed 30 April 2016].

⁵³ Tavvry, 1.

⁵⁴ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, *Cloth: A Visual and Verbal Collaboration*, Interrogating Contested Spaces in Post-Conflict Society (Portadown, Northern Ireland: Millennium Court Arts Centre, 2007). Duffy's images and a version of 'Glad Rags' can be found under the collection 'Cloth' at <<http://ritaduffystudio.com/>>. [Accessed 19 August 2016].

One of my very first memories was of the local linen barons, the Cowdys, riding by on their impossibly high horses. They lived at Summer Island, an impossibly named place, on the road to Portadown.⁵⁵

The sobriquet 'linen baron' stems from the Plantation. Following the 'flight of the Earls' in 1607, the English Crown put in place policies to encourage the production of linen in Ireland. One argument used to persuade the City of London Companies to undertake the privately financed Plantation of Coleraine was the economic incentive that Ulster would furnish the requisites for 'thread, linen cloth, and stuffs made of linen yarn which is finer there and more plentiful than in all the rest of the Kingdom'.⁵⁶ Linen has a higher tensile strength when wet and was a valuable commodity used in the manufacture of rope, sailcloth, twine, as well as for clothing and household linen. In an era of maritime expansion linen would therefore have been of vital importance. As we know, Plantation policies were not purely economic and the "scheme to plant Ulster focused on the counties west of Lough Neagh and the River Bann in an attempt to break up the old centres of Gaelic influence in these areas."⁵⁷ The settlement of the Bann Valley included Collegeland, a small community near Portadown, where Muldoon grew up.

Muldoon has described his poetry as tending to 'look slightly farther back at the society from which the situation erupted, at *why* we are how we are now'⁵⁸ and the Cowdys of Portadown can be traced back to 'the original Cromwellian Grant of 1653'.⁵⁹ Muldoon's description of the 'local linen barons [...] riding by on their impossibly high horses' thus encompasses two perspectives – the child looking up at the seemingly giant-sized adults, and the adult who sees the encounter as symbolic of power structures dating back to the Plantation. For not only are the Cowdys passing by on their hubristically 'high horses', they do so on 'impossibly high horses'. The implied nemesis of 'impossibly' is repeated in the description of the Cowdys' home on 'Summer Island, an impossibly named place on the road to Portadown'.⁶⁰ Recorded as *E(a)nach Samhraidh* in *Cín lae Uí Mhealláin c.1645*, Summer Island appears to be an Anglicisation of the Irish for "summer marsh".⁶¹ And, in the same way that the Cowdys on their high horses represent shifts in power brought about by the Plantation, so Summer Island symbolises the linguistic and cultural changes that ensued from it.

As well as being 'impossibly named', Summer Island was also the scene of violence during the Troubles:

⁵⁵ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 16.

⁵⁶ *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1608-10*, 208. Quoted in George O'Brien, *The Economic History of Ireland in the Seventeenth Century* (London and Dublin: Maunsell and Co. Ltd., 1919), 78–79.

⁵⁷ Ian N. Gregory and others, 'Troubled Geographies: A Spatial History of Religion and Society in Ireland', 2013. Web. <<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/troubledgeogs/chap2.htm>> [accessed 1 May 2016].

⁵⁸ 'Paul Muldoon', in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*, ed. John Haffenden (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), 137.

⁵⁹ Kathleen Rankin, *The Linen Houses of the Bann Valley: The Story of Their Families* (Northern Ireland: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2007), 71.

⁶⁰ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 16.

⁶¹ For more details see: 'Place Names NI - Home'. Web.

<<http://www.placenamesni.org/resultdetails.php?entry=10092>>. [Accessed 28 October 2016].

On September 1, 1975, Denis Mullan, [...] was shot by the UVF in his house in Summer Island. Arterial Blood. The splendour of the purple.⁶²

Here, 'the splendour of the purple' refers to the Ulster Volunteer Force's flag - an orange background with a purple star, first used by Protestants loyal to William of Orange during the Williamite War of 1689-1691. However 'the splendour of the purple' also symbolises

the gunning down of 10 Protestants linen workers at Kingsmills, County Armagh. The splendour of the purple yet again.⁶³

By connecting two textile symbols, the purple cassocks of Roman Catholic priests and the purple star of the UVF flag, Muldoon implies that both sides are as bad as each other. Furthermore, in reaffirming the connection between textile symbols and terrorism, 'Glad Rags' also alludes to the fact that in Northern Ireland, textiles and violence are historically intertwined.

As might be surmised from the title of Jonathan Swift's poem, 'In the Behalf of the Distressed Weavers', weaving in Ireland was a subject of political and economic importance. This invariably led to tensions:

In Ireland the abolition of the penal laws against Catholicism in the 1760-1780s had different effects in different areas. In the centre of the fine weaving district in North Armagh a displacement crisis between Protestant and Catholic weavers acquired a new dimension when Protestants challenged Catholics' rights to bear arms; Protestant weavers' attacks on Catholic houses became searches for weapons as well as loom-wrecking expeditions.⁶⁴

One of these loom-wrecking militias was the 'Peep-o'-day Boys', so named because they would attack the houses of Roman Catholics early in the morning. In 'History Walk', John Montague writes:

And we read about the battle of Diamond Hill between 'Peep-o'-Day Boys' and Catholic Defenders which led to the founding of the Orange Order at Loughgall, a canker among the apple blossoms.⁶⁵

It would appear therefore that tensions in the weaving industry contributed to the establishment of the Orange Order in 1795 in Loughgall, close to Muldoon's childhood home near the Moy.

As previously stated 'Cloth' and 'Glad Rags' were first shown in Portadown, a former linen-manufacturing town situated in Northern Ireland's 'linen triangle'. This was the area between the three points of Dungannon, Lisburn and Armagh, later extending to Newry, that formed the triangular powerhouse of Ireland's fine linen industry. During the Troubles pockets of the linen triangle became synonymous with sectarian violence and Muldoon has described the area in which he grew up as:

⁶² Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 36.

⁶³ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 40.

⁶⁴ Frank Joseph Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), 12.

⁶⁵ John Montague, 'History Walk', (1993), *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Wake Forest University Press; The Gallery Press, 1995), 340, *Literature Online* [accessed 23 February 2016].

an area that formed when the latest spate of troubles – the Troubles were at their worst – an area associated with a lot of sectarian violence. It's part of what's known as the "murder triangle" which was a triangle with the three points being the towns of Dungannon, Armagh and Portadown.⁶⁶

In other words, the 'Murder Triangle' and 'Linen Triangle' overlap precisely where Muldoon was raised and where much of his poetry is situated. This then, is the context for the association of violence and textiles found in Muldoon's poetry.

In addition to presenting linen as a backdrop for sectarian violence, 'Glad Rags' also juxtaposes Northern Ireland's linen industry with Muldoon's own family history:

On December 2, 1939, the day general conscription was announced, my father had left England, where he'd been working as a labourer, and came back to County Tyrone. He bought a farm and started to grow flax, a crop which had gone into decline in Northern Ireland and, until the outbreak of war, had often been imported from Russia or Holland.

Between 1939 and 1943, the number of acres under flax in Northern Ireland would increase dramatically from 21,000 to 90,000.

One of those acres was tended by my father.⁶⁷

Flax is the blue-flowered plant from whose fibrous stems linen is produced. During WW2, linen was required for the manufacture of tents, aeroplane wings, parachutes and other military equipment. Following the German occupation of European ports, Northern Ireland became, albeit briefly, a centre of flax and linen production once again. Muldoon has described his family as nationalists and Patrick Muldoon's return to Ireland to cultivate flax on the eve of conscription implies that his decision was motivated by a desire to participate in the war effort without donning a British army uniform. Despite the fact that his father's flax farm was situated in County Tyrone, Patrick Muldoon's former occupation provides Muldoon with an entry point into Portadown's local linen manufacturing community. Thus when 'Glad Rags' returns to the image of the Cowdys, it is in the first person plural:

those impossibly high horses the Cowdys rode were destined always to come between us, destined always to keep us in our place.

Our place was in the flax field or the flax dam.⁶⁸ (C, 22-3)

There are echoes here of Muldoon's first pamphlet collection, *Knowing My Place*,⁶⁹ whose title 'hints at both class consciousness and the Irish *dinnseanchas* tradition of topographical lore'⁷⁰ and to a certain extent 'Glad Rags' continues that tradition. Flax cultivation had all but died out in Northern Ireland by the time Muldoon was born in 1951, and it is therefore highly unlikely that his 'place' would have been in either 'the flax field' or

⁶⁶ Roger Rosenblatt, 'Roger Rosenblatt and Friends: Paul Muldoon', *YouTube*. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQOIU7cAF5s>>. [Accessed 23 January 2017].

⁶⁷ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 18.

⁶⁸ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 22-3.

⁶⁹ Paul Muldoon, *Knowing My Place* (Belfast: Ulsterman, 1971).

⁷⁰ David Wheatley, "'Keeping That Wound Green': The Poetry of Paul Muldoon", *A Companion to Irish Literature*, Volume 2, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 375.

‘the flax dam’. However, by introducing Patrick Muldoon’s former occupation as a flax grower, ‘Glad Rags’ allows Muldoon to tie together his genetic and poetic lineage:

It was in January 1939, earlier in that same year my father came back to County Tyrone and started growing flax, that Yeats had written “Cuchulain Comforted”.⁷¹

When ‘Glad Rags’ and ‘Cloth’ were first shown in Portadown it was under the title, ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, after Yeats’s poem, which begins as follows:

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head
Came and were gone. [...] ⁷²

Here the disembodied forms of the dead have no distinguishing features other than the shrouds they themselves fabricate and from which they are, quite literally, defined. Like the world Cuchulain enters after death, Duffy’s paintings are inhabited by apparitions, dressed not in Yeats’s linen shrouds, but in flax jackets, priests’ cassocks, legal gowns, linen jackets – clothing which, in a Northern Irish context, symbolises power and violence. As previously stated, Muldoon’s text provides a narrative voice for Duffy’s disembodied images and here the narrative links not only textiles and violence, but textile and text:

a poem with a cast of convicts – *conscripts*, maybe – indistinguishable from the shrouds of linen they themselves have woven and sewn.⁷³

By associating his father’s avoidance of conscription in 1939 with the self-woven Shroud-poets of Yeats’s 1939 poem, Muldoon links his own poetic and genetic forbears. Furthermore, this association provides Muldoon with another metaphor for poetic craft, one that draws on the textile tropes of Yeats (among others) and his father’s flax growing:

Line, from the Latin, *linum*, flax. The word “flax”
is related to *flay*. All about the excoriation.
All about the unpeeling.
[...]
The shrugging off of the outer layers.⁷⁴

By association, the “flax/flay” and “line/flax” connection becomes a “line/flay” connection and with it the suggestion of a link between poetic line and flay. In this light, Muldoon’s reference to the processing of flax as ‘All about the excoriation. / All about the unpeeling’,⁷⁵ can be seen to refer not just to the process of turning flax into linen but also, and more significantly, to Muldoon’s poetic process.

⁷¹ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 22.

⁷² William Butler Yeats, ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997, 2nd edition), 340, *Literature Online* [accessed 1 January 2017].

⁷³ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 22.

⁷⁴ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 42-44.

⁷⁵ Rita Duffy and Paul Muldoon, 42.

There are obvious similarities between Patrick Muldoon's flax cultivation and the father of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Digging'.⁷⁶ Both are seen in terms of their rural and "natural" activities, activities that are metaphorically taken up and transformed by their sons. However, as Fran Brearton notes, 'it is now a commonplace to suggest that Muldoon's "father", as he appears in the poetry, can sometimes slide in Heaney's own "father"' adding that this is a connection Muldoon has 'mischievously'⁷⁸ promoted. While there are undoubtedly risks in following the trail laid down by Muldoon, the flax/flay/line image may provide a more useful way of reading Muldoon's work than the language of 'Digging'. Both incorporate the notion of stripping back and uncovering. However rather than 'digging through the layers of Irish cultural, political and literary subsoil',⁷⁹ Muldoon's poetry is engaged in a peeling back of layer upon layer, to reveal, not the familiar certainty 'of roots, of identity',⁸⁰ but never-ending layers of construct, whether political, social or literary.

To conclude, we have seen how Muldoon plays on the notion of text as textile with poetic form presented as a 'loom'. In 'Errata', this produces a patterned weave of 'misreadings' and 'corrections' that playfully draws on Harold Bloom's theory, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Poetic history is thus presented as a fabric of intertextual (and lexical) misprision. In 'Glad Rags', Linen is shown quite literally as the fabric of the society in which Muldoon was raised. Furthermore, the poem posits a correspondence between Portadown's history of linen manufacturing and its history of sectarian violence. By linking his father's flax-growing to Yeats's poem, 'Cuchulain Comforted', 'Glad Rags' extends the notion of 'text' as 'textile', to include flax processing as a metaphor for poetic practice. It follows, therefore, that in drawing on and extending existing notions of poetic 'weaving', Muldoon's poetry can be read as an intertextual 'fabric of traces', one that is as textile as it is textual.

⁷⁶ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987* (London ; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), 1.

⁷⁷ Brearton, 48.

⁷⁸ Brearton, 52.

⁷⁹ Rachel Buxton, 'Never Quite Showing His Hand: Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon', *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, eds. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 37.

⁸⁰ Buxton, 37.

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