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“The Treaty,” and “Flags and Emblems”:

Critical Consideration of Irish Sectarian

Conflicts in Contemporary Poetry

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Poetry has often been seen as a reflection of a poet’s society, wherein they rely on memories, history, and perception to give meaning and understanding to community and culture. Specifically, subjective honesty and perspective of poets can give valuable insight into the reality of events and an accurate representation of a certain emotional social climate. Political strife and conflict is a prevalent motif in Irish poet Paul Muldoon’s work, demonstrating a thoughtful critique of past and present political affairs. Given Paul Muldoon’s Irish heritage, his political poetry is primarily concerned with that of Ireland. From his book *Horse Latitudes* (2006)*,* “The Treaty” illustrates his critical view of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty; a treaty that drew out such conflicting attitudes that quickly to lead to the Irish Civil War of 1922-23. In “The Treaty,” Muldoon uses his personal lineage and Irish tradition to illuminate public perception of the signing, comparing the political climate of the time with the shortcomings of his grandfather’s trade, while contrasting the nature of common people with political affairs. Similarly, from Muldoon’s “Flags and Emblems”(2006*),* he continues to cast political and historical relations in a negative light, of the Irish Civil War that directly followed the events from “The Treaty”. In “Flags and Emblems,”Muldoon cleverly couples corrupt and indecent activities of both sides of the war, with the refrain from a traditional Irish song, to the effect of intermixing the actions of both sides and criticizing them equally for their depravity. Through his manipulation of heritage, experience, and craft, Paul Muldoon is able to convey honest interpretations of public views on the events leading to, and the time during, the Irish Civil War.

In both poems, “Flags and Emblems”and“The Treaty,”Muldoon excludes any consistent meter, and instead focuses on perfect rhymes to communicate his argument. This has a direct effect on the concentration put onto the rhymes and stresses richer inlayed meaning. In “The Treaty,”one effect of the perfect elegance of his skilful rhyming is the implication of the speaker’s inherent argumentative neatness, relating confidence into their argument. It also sets up a contrast between the speakers grandfather ‘Frank Regan’, and the politician ‘Gormley’. Not only creating an increased reliability of the speaker’s story by relating it to his lineage, each line of the first stanza is associated with ‘Frank’, mentioning his ‘shoulders in a moult’, conveying the grandfather’s discomfort, and the double meaning of moult also implying the change and by extension the speakers discomfort with the changes. The rhyming pairs seem to be almost all perfect, excluding the half rhyme of ‘cuffs’. The minor discrepancy created by changing the perfect rhyme to half rhyme with the plural foreshadows the major conflict of the poem. This is finally understood with the final rhyme of ‘Nation-’ and ‘Alterations’, putting pressure on this final rhyme because it isn’t as clean as the preceding rhymes, which imply the hurried nature of the treaty. This achieves the assertion that it is indeed meant to be the plural form of nations, which is what the treaty is unifying, two nations. This relationship is reinforced by the poems near Petrarchan sonnet form that supports the rhythm, and quickens the pace of the poem, also implying the rushed treaty. Muldoon employs the same techniques in “Flags and Emblems” in order to quicken the pace of the poem, and in doing so, is able to mix together the actions of both sides of the Civil War that follows the Treaty. This connects the ‘Provo or Stickie’ and the ‘Tara’ or ‘ex-Paras’, intermingling their motives and actions. Through this treatment of the treaty and the civil war to follow Muldoon presents a critical view of both events, in favour of neither side.

Muldoon is able to emphasize the blend of affairs in “Flags and Emblems” with his masterful use of enjambment, creating the illusion that each side bleeds into the other until they become indistinguishable. He uses the refrain of ‘Riddle-me-o” to break verses, but continues the lines through the next stanza to create the association with the other military group. Then uses the rhyme scheme to solidify this association, rhyming negative connotative phrases from one side with the names of the other:

“with some moonlighting Provo or Stickie

who did you over, whoah, did you over

till your blue-black hickey

riddle-me-o

riddle-me-o

ran like mascara

Or the former members of Tara”

This intermixing of rhyme and musicality is reminiscent of fairy tales as in ‘not even the fee-fie-fo-fumble/ of a giant cattle drover’ creates a playful air to a dark topic and supports the question of how one can thoughtlessly wear an emblem that represents so much depravity. This use of enjambment and rhyme is evident in “The Treaty” as well. As well as the aforementioned use of rhyming pairs, the enjambment seen from the first to second stanza exemplifies the contrast between the ‘mud-walled house in Cullenramer’ that represents the speakers grandfather and the materialistic ‘sky-stuff’ and ‘flimflammer’ that the politician represents. Through this poem Muldoon uses a recurring motif of nature vs. material, and uses it to show that politicians and their actions are not infallible.

Muldoon uses hyphens subtly, but to great effect in both poems as well. It is mostly to the same effect, supporting the sense of speed already developed through the enjambment and rhyming. However, it is especially apparent and important in ‘The Treaty.’ Muldoon uses it to enforce the contrast between nature and material, as mentioned with the ‘mud-walled house’ and ‘sky-stuff’, however it becomes critically important in the hyphen between ‘nation-hood.’ This divide suggests the hyphens represent the borders between the nations, and by the enjambment across two stanzas Muldoon is physically spreading the borders thin. Then he also pairs this with ‘hood’, which is fundamentally a material, and a shrouding material, that Muldoon has developed as being flawed. He develops this to foreshadow the inevitable rejection of the treaty. The motif of materials is continued in “Flags and Emblems” with the over hanging question of how both sides of this war could wear the Irish emblem that represents so much conflict. In the last stanza of the poem the alliteration and vocabulary of the first line demonstrates the nature of the entire poems content, ‘amid the roundabout’s right-as-rain azaleas’, the cyclical nature of the conflict and the intermingling of the sides and actions, and yet they share the same emblems.

Paul Muldoon has demonstrated a critical view in ‘The Treaty” and “Flags and Emblems”. With his adept manipulation of form, rhythm, rhyme, and phonics he has relived the perils of hasty politics, investigating the relationship between nature and materials, and citizen and government. If poetry is a reflection of a poet’s society, then Paul Muldoon paints a clear portrait of the reality of the treaty and Irish Civil War.

References:

Muldoon, Paul. “The Treaty.” *Horse Latitudes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Pg#32. Print.