

# “Unapproved Road”: Poetic Roadblocks and Animal Traffic in Paul Muldoon

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## I. Cross-border Traffic and Unapproved Roads

Paul Muldoon’s “Unapproved Road” lifts its title from the official word on Irish border traffic. Four years after partition created a land border between the newly formed Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in 1922, and three years after the 1923 customs barrier instituted a parallel economic partition (Nash and Reid 272), the Free State’s 1926 “Statutory Rules on Road Signs and Traffic Signals Regulations” declared that

Where a road crosses the frontier the approach to the frontier shall be indicated by a direction sign to be erected ... at a point one quarter of a mile from the frontier. Whether traffic is or is not permitted to cross the frontier on the road shall be indicated ... by the words “approved road,” or “unapproved road,” as the case may require. (Government of Ireland)

The repetition of specific words in these rules and regulations is already complicit with material circulation, given their apparent power to make the border itself visible (from a distance of one-quarter mile) and to permit or prevent cross-border traffic, whether human, automobile, or other.<sup>1</sup> By importing its title across the border’s troubled history, Muldoon’s “Unapproved Road” itself smuggles into lyric poetry the persistent political ten-

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sions and capital motivations of border traffic and so presents the two crossover critical opportunities that I take up in this paper. The first is generic; the second topical. At least since John Stuart Mill's definitive and defensive "What is Poetry?" (1833) and culminating in New Criticism a century later, the genre has been defined habitually and read lyrically as if separate and separable from any historical, material, and economic contingency.<sup>2</sup> But rather than remove Muldoon's border poem (among others) from circulation by reading it as an autonomous or even autopoietic lyric (Jackson 56), I will read it to reveal the genre's inevitable traffic in a larger economy, approved or not.<sup>3</sup> Correlated to this generic traffic, "Unapproved Road" also pre-empts any immobilization of the Irish border as if exclusively political or statically symbolic. In their recent "Border Crossings," Catherine Nash and Bryonie Reid address the border's changing cultural, material, and economic significance throughout the twentieth century and encourage a reading of its double meaning "as material and imagined, literal and figurative" (267). I add a literary and theoretical register to their call by focusing on the ways in which poetic and capital traffic in words and goods—especially of the illicit or invisible kind—crosses or remains stalled at the Irish and Muldoonian borders. Besides redirecting genre and border studies, crossing poetic with capital traffic at the border can reveal the inevitable accidents and effects of their shared but ironically inverse logic: a desire for automobile circulation as if natural and perpetual (without borders), yet perpetually foiled by its own vehicle made visible.

1 See Nash et al. for a detailed account of the material and discursive mechanisms that "put the border in place" after partition and up to the end of World War II, with particular attention to the resulting mobilities and immobilities.

2 Lyric theory's fall guy or straw man as much as its "touchstone" (Jackson 56), Mill seeks to police "the boundaries which she [poetry] herself has set, and erect a barrier round them" (5), refusing poetic production any traffic in a larger economy, whether in the form of an audience or in payment for a volume of poems "printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a book-seller's shop" (12). For Mill, poetry ought to be "soliloquy" or "feeling confessing itself to itself": reflexive and autopoietic in its impossibly splendid isolation and only ever "overheard" (12; that is, not intended for aural or other circulation as a commodity). Given this definition, and taking a page from Muldoon's "Errata," for "poetic" read "lyric" throughout. See Jackson and Poovey for a history of the genre's simultaneous lyricization (via a model of lyric reading) and its professionalization (via "The Model System").

3 Jennifer Bajorek calls this possibility "the inspiration to think the material(ity) of capital's history as a matter for poetry" (5). She is thinking of Walter Benjamin's "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," written in the same year Cle-anth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren published New Criticism's pedagogical handbook (*Understanding Poetry* 1938) but presenting an antithetical model of reading.

I examine this cross-border traffic particularly through the vehicle of the animal, which figures doubly in the logics of poetic and capital circulation: in the movement of animal figures as or alongside vehicles within Muldoon's poems<sup>4</sup> and against the background of smuggling material animals and goods—from cows and cigarettes to electronics and guns—across the Irish border (also in and as vehicles). The animal and animals appear as a common and largely invisible means to poetic and capital ends, otherwise imagined to be self-starting and self-perpetuating (that is, automobile).<sup>5</sup> In the same way that material animals grease the wheels of capital's cross-border circulation, so their figurative counterparts seem to ease linguistic traffic, specifically as vehicles through which to render their poetry in motion natural or primal. Critically and poetically, each of Muldoon's poems dramatizes the tensions (and collisions) within this fantasy of perpetual and autonomous motion by literalizing it in the otherwise allegorical vehicle, be it animal, automobile, or both. Thematically and historically, each poem mobilizes the political and sectarian tensions of driving, or of trafficking goods, between the Republic and Northern Ireland. First, I lay out the history of this traffic on unapproved roads via "Unapproved Road" and turn to "Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward" to outline Muldoon's traffic in figurative animals (and invisible authors) as a kind of perpetual poetry in motion. Then I consider his "Cows" in more detail, which attempts to "allegorize" (l. 42) the invisible cargo of a cattle truck stalled at the border, presumably trafficking in paramilitary weapons or electronics rather than the titular bovines. In conclusion, I turn back to "Unapproved Road," which itself reinvests in "Cows" to ruminate on animals' invisible cross-border infiltration and their transformation into words. But even as we mobilize or regulate animal traffic to ease poetry's and capital's discursive and material circulation, these animals disclose the fatal breakdowns and inevitable roadblocks in both systems at the border.

To begin again with the historical context of "Unapproved Road," the official words of Irish border regulation focus primarily on the movement and taxing of goods and especially on animals. When the border was

4 David Wheatley notes that "animal hybrids" are a "Muldoon staple" (126), ranging from *Mules* and "horselike monsters" to coneys, hedgehogs, cows, panthers, and, most recently, *Maggot* and *Horse Latitudes*. See Bentley for a reading of these horses as talking Irish Republican heads against the critical image of Muldoon as apolitical and "postmodern trickster" (113).

5 Bajorek characterizes this move as the "hocus-pocus" by which capital "pretends to produce something from out of nothing, like a rabbit from a hat," dragging everything but value "into its disappearing act" (1)—animals too.

first put in place in the 1920s, the island's economy relied overwhelmingly on agriculture (Nash et al. 3, Thom and Walsh 4). Regulating this agricultural economy and its animal traffic faced the double challenge of geography and logistics; nearly two hundred unapproved roads crisscrossed the new border, which meandered over 450 kilometres and cut across fourteen hundred holdings, sometimes dividing farmers' homes from their fields and livestock (Anderson and O'Dowd 685). Most unapproved roads remained open to foot and farm traffic and to farm goods as long as no duty was due—excluding live cattle for slaughter (Nash et al. 8)—but vehicle traffic was strictly regulated after 1925, and for more than six decades only thirty border posts and customs stations remained in place on just fifteen approved roads (Nash and Reid 271, Nash et al. 4–5). According to the official word, all goods had to pass through one of these posts, but illegal traffic nonetheless flowed both ways across the border. Its direction and the goods of choice depended on changing political and economic conditions, in particular on shifting duties and regulations. During the economic war of the 1930s, the British government imposed a 20 percent tax on previously exempt agricultural goods from the Free State, including live animals and game, bacon and pork, poultry and eggs, and butter and cream (Nash et al. 8); as a result, goods were smuggled primarily from south to north, livestock in particular. In the 1940s and 50s, wartime and postwar rationing on both sides encouraged a two-way flow of restricted and taxable edibles (Nash et al. 10), and “everyone smuggled butter, cheese, margarine, sugar, bacon and meat” as well as chocolate, according to one recollection (Willcocks 18).

Muldoon's “Unapproved Road” also recollects and participates in this apparently universal activity, which was stalled by the Irish Republican Army's active border campaign in the 1950s when customs posts in Northern Ireland began to double as Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) or British army checkpoints. The poem is set in 1957, immediately following the IRA's first cross-border salvo: the unsuccessful New Year's Day attack on the Brookeborough RUC station, during which IRA members Sean South and Fergal O'Hanlon were shot (l. 6–7). The first stanza opens with sudden silence and immobility in the face of economic and sectarian sanctions, just as its narrator's vehicle has been stopped on one of the approved roads:

When we came to the customs post at Aughnacloy, as at  
Cullaville or Pettigoe,  
I was holding my breath

as if I might yet again be about to go  
underwater ... (1–4; ellipsis in original)

Arguably an almost-too-young Muldoon (who would have been six years old at the time), this nervous narrator remains in the passenger seat while his uncle Patrick Regan is taunted by the border guard about the IRA's botched action. But if the narrator is holding his breath in response to the palpable sectarian tensions in the air, he's also sitting on a stash of goods by which he fears the guard will "rightly trace" their (Catholic) affiliation to the other side of the border and so to "Sean South" (27). However dutifully—or dangerously (34–36)—stopped at the approved post, Muldoon and uncle are in fact in the act of smuggling a "bottle of Redbreast" whisky, a "carton of Players," and a "bullion chest of butter" under the RUC man's scarf-covered nose, in an attempt to evade the excise tax (31–33).

But here "Unapproved Road" leaves its reader hanging at the border. Structurally, its sections traffic between this tense moment in 1957 and 1987, "thirty years later" (14). While we won't ever know whether Muldoon and uncle successfully evaded duty on their goods, official attempts to eliminate price differentials were largely unsuccessful and illegal traffic persisted in the intervening three decades. The 1965 British-Irish free-trade agreement and the 1973 European Economic Community's Common Agricultural Policy failed to produce the promised common market, and through the booming 1970s and the Republic's bust in the 1980s an agricultural carousel trafficked cereals, cattle, and pigs from one side of the border to the other to avoid taxes and other penalties, then brought them back across on approved roads to collect on premiums or subsidies (Thom and Walsh 3–4; Norton). Alongside this continued traffic in agricultural and consumer goods, and as the violence of the Northern Irish Troubles escalated, the British army began to spike or crater unapproved roads, blowing impassable holes in them to prevent paramilitary gun-running and other capital ventures (though sometimes at the expense of running animals between barns on one side of the border and fields on the other ["1971"]). In the Republic, many border roads were closed in an attempt to contain the violence and control the movement of paramilitary groups (Nash and Reid 272). The official customs posts—"at Aughnacloy, as at Cullaville or Pettigoe" (1)—were themselves closed in 1992 when both the Republic and Great Britain became part of the European Union's open market, effectively ending trade restrictions and approving all roads for legal traffic across the border (Coakley and O'Dowd 17; Nash and Reid

I want to turn  
to the primary  
function of  
Muldoon's  
animal and  
authorial  
traffic as a kind  
of poetic capital.

269). In 1994, the army checkpoints too were closed when the Good Friday Agreement was signed and the Troubles officially ended.

“Unapproved Road” itself ends, structurally and thematically, on (animal) freedom of movement against (vehicular) immobility. If our narrator remains stuck in his car, he is also deep in conversation with someone who has inherited a “total disregard for any frontier” (24): a Tuareg, descended from the nomadic North African “people of the veil” (21), who “drove their flocks from tier to tier / through Algeria, Mali, and Libya all the way up to Armagh, Monaghan, and Louth” (22–23).<sup>6</sup> This poetic, geographic, and transhistorical mobility transfers almost too easily between human, animal herd, and language, all perpetually driven by their freedom from and disregard for any official word on cross-border traffic. In the final stanza, our (perhaps problematically) cosmopolitan Tuareg “immediately set[s] off at a jog trot down an unapproved road” (47), leaving us in his dust as he adopts a near-animal mobility in his equine “trot” (etymologically equine, at least, although no less problematically). Like its footloose rogue—to whom I will return below—Muldoon’s “Unapproved Road” trots or traffics not only between past and present but between its narrator’s automobile immobility (at the border post) and the Tuareg’s easy passage as a natural rover, between material circulation or congestion and a timeless animal and perpetual poetic mobility. What logic drives this shared and desired (if not total) “disregard for frontiers”?

## II. Automobility, or Poetry in Motion

In order to track this question, I want to turn to the primary function of Muldoon’s animal and authorial traffic as a kind of poetic capital, in his poetological statements and through “Good Friday 1971. Driving Westward,” from his first collection (*New Weather* 1973). In both cases, Muldoon banks paradoxically on the animal (as natural vehicle) and the poem or author (as driver) as if first and originary, mobilizing a kind of poetry in motion to “get round” obstacles and “toward” a self-perpetuating and autonomous *ars poetica*, as he has it in his 1998 Bateson Lecture. In that lecture, he remains stalled on the border between the poet as autonomous driver versus passive passenger (“driven” by the poem), even as he acknowledges that any traffic in poetic allusions and influence is a two-way street rather than an autopoietic enterprise—that is, one that

6 Following Jahan Ramazani’s recent reading of transnational “traveling poetry,” we might note the rapid “geopoetic oscillation” in these lines via the repeated initial letters of diverse place names: from a North African topography to a local Irish one without even the formal border of a line break (58).

requires circulation to accumulate meaning-value and must reinvest its own and mobilize others' previous poetic labour to that end. He insists on the "ungetroundable fact that the poet is the first person to read, or more importantly, to be read by, the poem" that writes or moves itself, over which the poet nonetheless retains possession in the form of initial intention and original interpretation (120).

This "ungetroundable" paradox of author *and* poem as "first," and as if (somehow mutually) autonomous, is repeated alongside—and contradicted by—his admission of anxious Bloomian influences that circulate almost through the air and in every echo; the inevitable accumulation of meanings and "possible readings" despite the (miserly) authorial attempt to restrict those "that are not productive" (quoted in Buxton 40);<sup>7</sup> and his acknowledgement that any author remains "a product of his or her time" ("Getting Round" 127). As a critic of other poets in "Getting Round" and elsewhere, Muldoon makes visible the intertextual circulation of images and echoes as historical products and in context, circulating deftly and near-unceasingly via extended metaphors of traffic, road blocks, and animals figures "which immediately bring up" other leaps and allusions, other usages and intentions: from sheep to goats to birds, from Donne to Yeats to Frost (114, 125). In other words, Muldoon wants to have his poetic traffic both ways, and to block it too: to admit that mobile poems circulate (illicitly because anti-lyrically), and to sustain the New Critical position on which he was "brought up" by reading the poem as if "self-contained ... insofar as is possible" ("An Interview" 13).<sup>8</sup> Without successfully getting round or settling either account in this figuring of autonomous firsts versus inevitable circulation, Muldoon is forced to conclude "Getting Round" with a (double) "Go figure" (127).

The fact that his traffic—critical as much as poetic—"gets round" on the animal as primary vehicle remains an "ungetroundable" obstacle on this border between autonomy and economy, literal and figurative. In his introduction to *The Faber Book of Beasts* (1997), an anthology of English lan-

7 In an interview with Lynn Keller, Muldoon insists that the writer should "reduce" the number of readings to "one, two, three, or maybe four ways," though this sly creep places his tongue audibly in his cheek (13). His more than double readings of influence follow Frost's suggestion that the "first" reading or poem starts an endless accumulation of poetic capital, "the better" to read and reread with (*End* 60–61).

8 In the interview with Keller, Muldoon phrases the paradox in terms of consumption: he tries to "have" his poetic cake "and eat it, too," to give up the wheel to whatever form or word may come—because "poems write themselves" (auto-poietically)—while insisting that the author-driver isn't quite "dead" (13).

guage animal poems, Muldoon stakes the claim that “the very first animal poems” are “among the first poems of any kind” (xvi). The animal appears as if literally first among others—earliest, primary, originary—and thereby available to be mobilized and metaphorized through the language taken to be exclusively human.<sup>9</sup> In the *Book of Beasts*, animal figures effectively *become* or come to animate the language they can never have; Muldoon’s own apologies for collecting an anthology are initially and alliteratively animalized “to slough and slip and slither their way across the screen” (xv), but by the middle of the introduction, the poems themselves become mobile animals that have either “slipped through the net” of the anthology or been “roped in” and “corral[ed]” (xvi). As Nicole Shukin notes more generally in *Animal Capital*, “a primal link between ‘the animal and the metaphor’” is commonly assumed (40) and is often expressed as linguistic animation. The generic link between animal and poem via language is grounded (or literalized) by an invocation of primacy, by what Shukin calls the naturalization or idealization of animal as affect or “pure energy” (41), and by motion as the first thing to be taken as a sign of (wild) life via the shared etymological root of animal and animation. For instance, in Akira Lippit’s example of the “animetaphor,” the animal is “already” taken to be “a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression” (165). This fantastic animation is sought for language by trafficking between figurative and literal animals and by literalizing metaphor itself as animal “transport” or carryover, as if its status *as* metaphor might be elided by the equation of its literalized “is.” To borrow Ernesto LaClau and Chantal Mouffe’s pithy observation, here “literality is, in actual fact, the first of metaphors” (80; quoted in Shukin 27).

In the case of linguistic animal traffic, the figure of the animal is literalized to ensure a kind of poetry in motion as if first and forever. Muldoon’s animal poetry in motion traffics in or buys into this first of metaphors, mobilized in “Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward” (*Poems* 19). The poem also traffics in the allusive capital of poetic tradition, exchanging the invisible horse and the heroic couplets of Donne’s “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward” for the narrator’s car and seven-line stanzas of loosely loping rhymes. “Driving” puns on the divine prime mover of “Riding” and his infinite supply of grace, displacing Donne as first Metaphysical and replacing his influence with an equally invisible, originary, and seemingly infinite

9 See Nicole Shukin and Cary Wolfe on the humanist ideology that posits language and labour as grounds for “speciesist differentiation” (Shukin 79).

supply of animal and authorial auto-mobility.<sup>10</sup> Each motion in Muldoon's "Driving" appears as prime when the speaker begins his self-moving journey with nearly the first (divine) light and words: "It was good going along with the sun" (1) that also rises with the "first cows ... leaving the byres" and "the first lorry" delivering "its load" (12–13). The poetic collapse of these disparate motions—animal in the cows, capital in the lorry's load, and apparently perpetual or at least diurnal in the sun—naturalizes all of them, as if one and the same, via the speaker's vehicular motion and singular vision. But this seamlessly heliotropic and seemingly universal poetry in motion is soon to be disrupted by the geographic and political seam of a border and particularly by animal traffic, material or imagined. The driver's "happy" trail starts out northwest across County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, "through Ballygawley, Omagh and Strabane" (2), pausing only to pick up "a girl" to whom he gives a "lift" (18). As they cross back into Donegal and the Republic at "the last great frontier" of Lifford (19), however, they are immediately "Marooned by an iffing and butting herd / Of sheep" (20). This grin-inducing pun is telling for its foreshadowing of Muldoon's later animal traffic and is serious in its implications for linguistic mobility. As in the *Book of Beasts*, this turn of phrase transforms animals into the language they cannot have.

The border too easily but obviously crossed in this poetic line is its apparently seamless transfer from ovine milling to linguistic movement, from verbal hemming and hawing into verb. Muldoon's almost onomatopoeic phrase at once enacts and exposes its fantastic traffic between literal and figurative, so that the "iffing and butting" herd that momentarily suspends the automobile nonetheless perpetuates poetic motion. Such is the overall effect of the mobility in "Driving": to barrel formally through borders and switch vehicles mid-foot (from Donne's prior mount to car to animal and back) in an attempt to have its traffic both ways, licit or not. Even in the gerund of its title and the one-two trot of its couplets across stanzas, "Driving" and driver dream of having the animal-vehicle of the poem's self-moving lines and its autonomous author too: a means to the

10 If Donne's influence is visible only obliquely in the poem's title, Muldoon frequently acknowledges his investment in interviews behind the poetic scenes, positioning Donne as "first" among influences ("Getting Round" 108). Muldoon recalls that he "began" by reading Donne and Herbert ("Times"), and names Donne in the opening of "Sillyhow Stride," from *Horse Latitudes* (having gained enough of his own capital?). Faber and Faber has invested in these interests in their "Poet to Poet" series, in which "a contemporary poet selects and introduces a poet of the past" (68). Muldoon, of course, will select and introduce Donne, which volume is to be hot off the press in June 2011.

end of perpetual poetry in motion via an almost automobile form, despite thematic roadblocks, narrative detours, or allusive debts.

The literalized conceit of “Driving” thus seems to practice an easy poetic or prime linguistic automobility, to adapt Shukin’s apt definition of modern capital’s (literal) “*automobility*” as “the ‘moving’ effects of cars ... effects achieved by technologically as well as semiotically mimicking the seamless physiology of animals in motion” (90). Shukin shows that “the *moving* animal”—both physiologically and affectively—is taken as a sign of technological mobility within the discursive logic of capital (42), evident in the automobile advertised *as* natural animal mobility and in the “wireless” or “tele-mobile” animal affect effected in telecommunications advertisements. Yet despite the apparently automobile poetic logic of “Driving,” moving animals become as much a sign of affective and figurative immobility when faced with moving vehicles. After getting round the earlier ovine roadblock, the driver loses control mid-stanza and fails to stop for animal (or other) traffic in the middle of the road:

She thought we had hit something big  
But I had seen nothing, perhaps a stick  
Lying across the road. I glanced back once  
And there was nothing but a heap of stones.  
We had just dropped in from nowhere for lunch

In Gaoth Dobhair, I happy and she convinced  
Of the death of more than lamb or herring.  
She stood up there and then, face full of drink,  
And announced that she and I were to blame  
For something killed along the way we came. (31–40)

“Iffing *and* butting” comes back to characterize the differing attitudes of driver and passenger toward this invisible road kill. The driver’s initially having “seen nothing” transmutes into a qualified “perhaps a stick” and subsequently grows into “but a heap of stones,” parallel to the passenger’s “something big” that grows physically, psychically, and symbolically into “more than lamb or herring” (no ifs).<sup>11</sup> To borrow its own conceit, “Driving” reads as a hit-and-run poem, whose “happy” speaker/driver can easily get over or around whatever was (not) killed, literally and poetically as much as affectively. Yet its automobility is interrupted by the now-immobilized

<sup>11</sup> Given its intertext and its religious animal symbols, critics tend to focus on the poem’s gumming up rather than going through the motions of Catholic guilt and confession. See Kennedy-Andrews (86) and Clark (169).

*animobility* that would render lively linguistic motion natural and primal by “semiotically mimicking the seamless physiology of animal motion” and affect (Shukin 90).<sup>12</sup> In fact, the passenger’s sense of guilt and her if/then logic make her own lamb-like confession more of a tactical red herring in the poetic scheme of things, a deliberate distraction from the now-visible collision of the poem’s double vehicles for poetry in motion: one animal, one automobile. To translate into I. A. Richards’s terms, whereas in capital automobility the car-as-capital is the tenor and the animal-as-natural is the vehicle, in this would-be automobile poem both car *and* animal become conflicting vehicles for the tenor of (allegorical) linguistic or authorial mobility. Following the passenger’s guilt-ridden logic—combined with the driver’s unreliably happy narrative—we might even end up at poetic automobility itself as the autoimmune “more than” that lies dead in the middle of the road, pointing out the “but” in the “as if” of its traffic between figurative animal and formal poetry in motion. The poem’s apparently first vehicle is now road kill at the hands or wheels of its second, doing in the naturalized collapse between these hardly prime mobilities. In this way, the animal repeatedly stops or suspends cross-border traffic; its ifs and buts interrupt any untroubled circulation of or between literal and metaphoric. While “Driving”’s animal traffic can’t escape the logic on which its automobility relies, neither can it escape its having made visible that allegorical traffic (paradoxically by the animals’ very invisibility), effectively calling a momentary halt that adds up to dead ends or collisions rather than perpetual motion.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, the  
animal  
repeatedly stops  
or suspends  
cross-border  
traffic.

### III. “Getting Round”: Bovine Roadblocks

Following invisible animals run down in the middle of the poetic road, I want to take up another animal roadblock in the middle of words and “Cows” (*Poems* 344–45). Muldoon first published “Cows” in the winter of 1993 in a *Ploughshares* special issue on “Borderlands,” and the poem was later collected in *The Annals of Chile* (1994). On the cusp of a new economic era of common markets—and postcustoms posts—Muldoon takes “Cows” as an occasion to play out the unknowable and invisible in “Driving” and to play with the tensions between poetic and capital traffic or, better, with their collusion and even collision at the border. Whereas nothing but

12 See Shukin on “The Double Entendre of Rendering” (20–25).

13 Even this immobile end can be recuperated under the logic of the poem’s recited title; as Clair Wills notes, “a death on Good Friday is not really a death, an ending, but a prelude to resurrection” (36). She also observes the thematic continuation of this “arrested, perpetual movement” in *Why Brownlee Left* (78).

its own conceit made visible could stop the poetry in motion of “Driving” (in its total disregard for frontiers), “Cows” begins and ends with almost total immobility, stuck somewhere near the Northern Irish border with County Monaghan—a “very dangerous part of the world” at that time, as Muldoon observes in a later interview (“Cows” 270). Monaghan shares the longest section of the land border with Northern Ireland, making it a prime location for smuggling and (along with Dublin) the only part of the Republic to experience the paramilitary violence of the Troubles directly.<sup>14</sup> As Muldoon asks in his Bateson lecture, “How does one find an adequate reprise to the latest reprisal, a strophe equal to the latest catastrophe?” (125). This question echoes throughout “Cows,” as does the automobile as literal vehicle of death. The poem opens with a “we” in conversation, whose vehicular motion has been arrested by a near crash with a stalled cattle truck. This truck, probably driven by paramilitaries and now laid across the road in front of them, is “laden with” who knows what contraband and shows no visible sign of escaped animal cargo. The speakers’ subsequent aural and pedestrian milling too is stopped “dead” in the first lines (already *in medias res*):

Even as we speak, there’s a smoker’s cough  
from behind the whitethorn hedge: we stop dead in our  
tracks;  
a distant tingle of water into a trough. (1–3)

According to Muldoon, this hacking cough comes from a cow, which he describes as a “very scary” sound, “like somebody lurking in there” (“Cows” 270). Given the invisibility of its apparent source, this ominous and unapproved echo might easily cross the border between animal and human; we can hear “somebody” *or* something behind the fence, just as the “something big” in “Driving” might have been a human animal—or nothing (the former perhaps reinforced by the size and force of the passenger’s guilt but undermined by the driver’s nonchalance).

From the first line, “Cows” gets round or is run aground using the titular animals as its allegorical and invisible vehicle.<sup>15</sup> Though marooned in the middle of a rural and clearly unapproved road, its speaker nonetheless moves on and around this roadblock to build up his own Irish language pedigree: “this must be the truck whose taillights burn / ... / three or

14 In 1993, the Ulster Volunteer Force claimed responsibility for the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan car bombings.

15 The poem is also grounded in Muldoon’s dialogue with Belfast artist Dermot Seymour, to whom “Cows” is almost invisibly dedicated: “he’s really the other

four hundred yards along the boreen” (10, 12). The etymology laid out for “boreen” traces the term back to the invisible animal “itself,” and its parenthetical aside acts as a “drogue” or weight by which to thwart the plot’s forward motion (48). At the same time, the lines initiate a conceit that attempts to transcend borders and immobility by mobilizing animal as language, even by animalizing words:

(a diminutive form of the Gaelic bóthar, “a road,”  
from bó, “a cow,” and thar  
meaning, in this case, something like “athwart,”

“boreen” has entered English “through the air”  
despite the protestations of the O.E.D.): (13–17)

While *bó* does officially mean cow in Irish, conventional dictionaries define *thar* as a path (with secondary meanings of “stream” and “way or manner”). And although the speaker’s idiosyncratic etymology flaunts proper linguistic boundaries or pathways by defining the word on his own thwarted terms, his particular definition also relies on traffic between animals and language, as if it were the general case that the animal is at once the origin—the primal link—as much as the interruption, the absence, or even the negation of language (given the cow’s initial silencing cough). From its animal generation in *bó*, the word propels itself forward and takes on its own auto- and animobility, becoming an invisible virus or germ that travels “through the air”: the path of least resistance and fewest interruptions, free of economic land borders or unofficial roadblocks. More, *bó*’s status as the “diminutive” form of the larger *bóthar* gives the airborne word not only its freedom of movement but implies a familial animal analogy (boreen is to *bóthar* as calf is to cow), positioning our speaker as at least wrangler if not future breeder of further words out of thin air (as in *The Book of Beasts*). After the first stanza’s immobilized “tracks,” these etymological digressions come to structure the whole poem; “Cows” goes off on seemingly perpetual flights of poetic mobility around the immobilized cattle

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person in the poem ... he makes super-realistic paintings, often featuring cows and generally some surrealist landscape set on the border into Northern Ireland, often with a helicopter gunship, which comes out in the poem itself” (“Cows” 263–64). Seymour’s semi-“surrealist” and “super-realistic” scenes combine Cold War with Troubles tensions, as in *The Russians will water their horses on the shores of Lough Neagh* (1984), which features said gunship as well as cows and a hedge. Muldoon picks up on these objects and on Seymour’s dark juxtaposition of pastoral animals and landscape with the instruments of war.

truck, even on transnational excursions via rhyming echoes, puns, and stanzaic leaps from Japan to the Middle East (28–38). The tension between automobile language and auto-immobility enacts its own punning leap across literal and linguistic vehicles, mobilizing not the cattle’s (natural) legs but their allegorical, perhaps magical, language:

That smoker’s cough again: it triggers off from drumlin  
to drumlin an emphysemantiphon  
of cows. They hoist themselves onto their trampoline

and steady themselves and straight away divine  
water in some far-flung spot  
to which they then gravely incline (22–27).

Both cows and “Cows”—that is, figurative animals and/as words—“hoist” themselves “through the air,” “far-flung” around the threat of being thwarted by roadblocks despite official linguistic protestations or border posts.

In apparent contrast to this easy (and divine) bovine mobility, however, the speaker again thwarts the OED by throwing up his own “gravely” linguistic roadblocks. He introduces and defines three viral neologisms: “emphysemantiphon,” “metaphysicattle” (perhaps more portmanteaux), and “oscaraboscarabinary” (23, 29, 46), each of which seems itself to interrupt the poetic flow of traffic. In interviews, Muldoon acknowledges these digressions and neologisms as “dangerous,” as if taking a dangerous “road”—not “allegorically” unlike the dark and unapproved road on which “Cows” is set—because they might thwart the expected extraction and accumulation of poetic capital in the form of meaning-value (“Cows” 270). While John Redmond notes that at readings Muldoon seems to get round these neological tongue twisters “as if they were natural,” Redmond himself is made to “pause” because he doesn’t know “how to distribute the stresses” (“Interview”). Muldoon agrees: “I think though one is stopped by those words. It is a problem in the sense that that is a road down which I can’t really go any further” (and if he did, the “next stop would be *Finnegans Wake*”). In other words, Muldoon has potentially immobilized his own poetry in motion by going too far, unable to travel further “through the air” if his unnatural neologisms stop readers in their metrical and poetic-capital tracks.<sup>16</sup> If its “bevy” of metaphysicattle has allowed a linguistic leap

16 In contrast to these unreadable roadblocks, in a later essay Redmond reads the speaker’s gloss on “boreen” as “helpful” (108) rather than ironic or “pompous,” as Muldoon suggests (“Cows” 271–72). He also notes that Muldoon’s work,

into winged neologism that transfers the animobile cows into automobile and apparently naturalized words, neither reader nor speaker can wholly get round the blatant, even ironic exposure of this traffic in (invisible) “Cows” as the poem’s allegorical vehicle. What stalls in this failure to circulate is a kind of poetic currency as much as a naturalized poetry in motion.

In “Getting Round,” Muldoon mobilizes Robert Frost’s similarly ironic path in “The Silken Tent,” which Muldoon sets out via a traffic conceit complete with cratered road, official warning sign, and highly visible “flashing light”: “my sense that Frost is already ironizing the phrase ‘at midday’ is substantiated by the over-the-top tone of the following phrase, ‘when a sunny, summer breeze,’ its alliterative pile-up stopping us for a moment, its momentary ungetroundability a hole in the road with a flashing light on top” (117). As poetic roadblocks go, “sunny, summer” hardly sounds as over-the-top as metaphysicattle, oscaraboscarabinary, or emphyseman-tiphon; Muldoon may be making a “pile-up” out of a fender-bender or taking a flying leap of allusion, perhaps in order to capitalize (critically) on his long self-affiliation with and admiration for Frost (see Buxton). In the context of “Cows” and drivers, this road conceit is doubly significant because it fades back into the flashing light of the cattle truck as unofficial warning or illicit blockage:

Again the flash. Again the fade. However I might allegorize  
some oscaraboscarabinary bevy  
of cattle there’s no getting round this cattle-truck,  
one light on the blink, laden with what? Microwaves? Hi-fis?

*Oscaraboscarabinary*: a twin, entwined, a tree, a Tuareg;  
a double dung-beetle; a plain  
and simple hi-firing party; an off-the-back-of-a-lorry  
drogue? (42–48)

This repeated light on the blink alerts us to more than the uncertainty of the truck’s cargo (as the truck becomes a beast of burden, “laden with

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like Frost’s, demands fast reading and slow understanding; though they appear easygoing on the “surface,” poems like “Cows” require rumination, as in Muldoon’s observation that Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”—of course!—“just flies off the page” and yet its “complexity is astounding” (quoted in Redmond 96). Overall, Redmond positions Muldoon in an (American) pragmatist economy, where “writing and reading are forms of work for Muldoon but they are not privileged ... it is work which is the privilege” (98).

[B]oth  
traffic in  
allegorical  
animals as  
vehicles to  
promote or  
carry other  
kinds of  
profiteering on  
unapproved  
roads.

what?” [45]: from “Driving’s” legitimate “first lorry” to illicit lorry). It also renders visible the poem’s linguistic cargo as conceit when the final stanza takes another etymological detour into apparently “ungetrondable” neologism. The double bind of oscaraboscarabinary’s stream-(or boreen)-of-consciousness gloss is not merely the echo of its doubled “scarab” nor its doubled-up and alliterative puns, nor even its uncertain import or the multiple meanings it transports, but instead its split effect: propping up the poem’s traffic between animal/language or goods/words (as in the etymological digression down the boreen) while calling that very attempt at cross-border trafficking into question. The speaker’s idiolectic and neological brogue certainly echoes the drogue that ends oscaraboscarabinary’s unofficial definition, etymologically as well as aurally: a drogue is a military target (dragged behind a plane for practice), a wind sock, or, most pertinently, a parachute (for flying objects) or restraint (for wheeled ones) used to slow the vehicle to which it is attached. The neologisms of “Cows” pull back on the poem’s allegorical traffic or transmission of meaning, too heavy to fly with the reader and instead creating a pothole (or parachute?) in the road/poem even in its digressive definition. Further, these words and “off-the-back-of-a-lorry drogue[s]” become illegal and cross-border contraband, and both traffic in allegorical animals as vehicles to promote or carry other kinds of profiteering on unapproved roads. In this sense, our nervous but pompous speaker may be paralinguistic as much as the invisible truck driver is probably paramilitary: alongside, beyond, or subsidiary to officially sanctioned traffic in language (the *OED*), violence, arms, or goods. “Cows” might then be read as a parapoetic text, at once in spite of and in cahoots with itself (and so “already ironized”): alongside the desire for mobilization and naturalization via the animal (that is, for poetry in motion) but also beside itself, subverting as much as subsidiary to this fantasy made visible and literal.

But “Cows” is not left hanging on its vehicle’s immobilization or on the question mark of these “drogue[s].” The last stanza dismisses its own aural echoing, etymological milling, and literary allegorizing—“Enough of Colette and Céline, Céline and Paul Celan” (49)—to return instead to the opening conversation:

Now let us talk of slaughter and the slain,  
the helicopter gun-ship, the mighty Kalashnikov:  
let’s rest for a while in a place where a cow has lain. (52–54)

On one level this tone resonates with the Republican discourse of patient sacrifice to “the cause” through paramilitary action (already ironized as “mighty”);<sup>17</sup> on another, it dismisses semantic byways for straight “talk” about guns, gunships, and gun-running, about (bovine or human) “slaughter and the slain.” Discussing this stanza with Redmond, Muldoon reclaims a more-than-allegorical import for his poem’s truck with unapproved roads, re-glossing the speaker’s (pompous) etymology to declare that “one of the things ‘Cows’ is saying is forget that world, forget about the meaning of ‘oscaraboscarabinary.’ It’s saying that that is completely by the way, that is irrelevant compared to the reality of standing on a road on a dark night and not knowing what’s going to happen next” (“Interview”).

Redmond agrees in his own essay, suggesting of its final stanza that “when we stop in our reading of ‘Cows,’ when it arrests us, we start to understand it,” because in the end, “pragmatic urgency” overcomes any “desire for literary game-playing” (108).<sup>18</sup> But like the passenger’s guilt in “Driving,” this recuperation of understanding or forgetting meaning-value in the face of the roadblock called “reality” may come across as a pragmatic herring. Rather than take this hermeneutic (not to say totally hermetic) road, on my cross-border reading of cows with “Cows,” what we might recall is not the autopoietic poem itself as self-moving or self-making, nor its or our readerly self-stopping or starting, nor even the poetic currency of meaning-value (however apparently counterfeit or useless in the face of violent “reality”). Instead, its animal traffic is rendered visible as part of a broader cross-border logic, repeatedly stalled on its own exposure rather than immediately overcome or easily got round. So the threat of “rest” or immobilization remains, but poetically and ironically rather than literally or fatally: “Cows” cannot wholly get the poem round this truck because there never were literal (read primal and natural) animals to move it or to be moved, only ever allegorical ones. The truck with its blinking but unreadable light becomes an empty sign without origin in either its cargo or in its animal namesake, conveniently named after an absent and invisible cog in the wheel of capital and now implicated in turn in the etymological and allegorical wheels of “Cows.” In the same way that “Cows” traffics in its linguistic bevy of cattle and in its parallel bevy of poets and

Instead, its  
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border logic.

17 As does the talking horse’s head at the end of “Gathering Mushrooms,” from *Quoof* (*Poems* 105–06); see Muldoon’s interview with Redmond and Bentley (113–16) for further discussion.

18 Redmond reads a commentary on paramilitary and political violence in these final lines, observing the echoes of Celan/slain/lain in Muldoon’s rhyme scheme (109).

allusions, then, the “cattle truck” is mobilized discursively and visually to ease the flow of capital traffic across the border, as if the truck carried its (invisible) namesake rather than illicit electronics or guns.

Such is the function and the fetish of both poetic and capital traffics, which mobilize parallel animal vehicles to opposite effects: on poetry’s part, to mistake or take over or smuggle in animal traffic as if a naturalized linguistic rather than allegorical mobility (via words whose etymologies are at once mobile and traceable to material animal origins, as in *boreen*),<sup>19</sup> and, on capital’s, to presume that its apparently perpetual motion rests on allegorical rather than material animal traffic. Contrary to this fetish, Shukin contends that “if animal life is violently subject to capital, capital is inescapably contingent on animal life ... One task of the critic of animal capital, then, is to *make their contingency visible*” (24). In my task as a would-be critic of poetic animal traffic, and even though “Cows” of course participates in both of these logics, the poem might equally be made to disrupt them. By revealing the opposite poles and stakes of animal traffic, by rendering their discursive mechanisms visible and contingent in an ironic collision, “Cows” immobilizes their too-easy traffic. In other words, and against poetic and capital (hardly best) intentions, “Cows” makes visible both capital’s animals as the alleged and allegorical vehicle of profit in the cattle truck and poetry’s lack of visible, material, or otherwise “lively” or primary animals (and therefore its own lack of automobility or poetry in motion), so that both fetishes are at least stalled though not resolved.

On Shukin’s argument, the animal disruption of capital’s circuits occurs from within, as in mad cow disease and bird flu. These literally viral infections level the biopolitical and discursive borders erected between human and animal, exposing the loops of animal-capital traffic as a porous two-way street (16).<sup>20</sup> Fittingly, the poetry in motion of “Cows” is disrupted not by any material animal or disease but from within and by the linguistic neologisms that become animalized or viralized “through the air”: following a logic that acts as if there were more than metaphysicattle beneath its invisible “Cows,” but infecting that logic by ironic exposure even in

19 To paraphrase Octave Mannoni’s definition, “Cows” is hung up on the “but” of fetishistic disavowal that knows very well the “as if” isn’t so, “but all the same”: “*Je sais bien, mais quand meme.*”

20 The first mad cow outbreak in 1996 and the subsequent foot-and-mouth scare exposed the ongoing smuggling of livestock across the Irish border and mobilized an impossible attempt to seal it completely against animal traffic. Patrols on the Republic’s side were stepped up along its (now) more than two hundred unapproved roads, seizures increased, every vehicle was checked, and all “cows and calves ... in Border fields” were counted (Anderson and Bort 16).

relying on it for mobilization. In other words, “Cows” lets its animals out of the vehicle and turns the automobility of poetry in motion into an open secret, an allegorical cargo that carries only its own contingent name or language. This viral possibility is compassed in Jennifer Bajorek’s cross-border question—serious *because* rhetorical—about poetic irony, allegory, and the potential critique of capital: “What if irony cannot be confined to literature or to language, but rather comes to inflect the production or circulation of all meaning or value under capital?” (3).

#### IV. The Ends of the “Unapproved Road”

In conclusion, I want to return to the passenger still holding his breath at the customs post in “Unapproved Road” to draw out its shared animal traffic and poetic truck with the previous texts. While Muldoon remains indebted to the influential capital of a Donne or a Frost, his later collections seem to trade equally on his own poetic currency; “Unapproved Road” was published from the hindsight of *Moy Sand and Gravel*, from 2002 (4–8). If this increasing trade banks on the surplus value of Muldoon’s ever-expanding *oeuvre* as if autopoietic and auto-influential—perhaps parallel to capital’s occult ability to add value to itself (but hardly out of nothing)—it may also make visible the hidden labour or vehicle that permits circulation. Rather than an automobile or authorial economy of one, this apparent autonomy is “already ironized” along with its ani-mobilizations, reversed even as it recuperates prior themes, firsts, and techniques.

Like “Driving,” the wished-for border-crossing in “Unapproved Road” is stalled by immobility; like “Cows,” the poem stages a series of digressions around these roadblocks, shifting between the present “black-coated rUC man” (25) and a restaurant “thirty years later, in Rotterdam” (14) where our narrator sits with “another black-coated, long fellow” (10) in a “sky-blue” scarf that covers his face except for his nose: the Tuareg, now another cumulative echo with the bevy of “Cows” and as well-versed in conversational Irish etymology and place names as the narrator himself. In that conversation, our narrator takes Scairbh na gCaorach alliteratively to mean “sheep-steeps” or “rampart of rams,” itself both literally and allegorically impassable: a ledge, a cliff, a “sheer drop” that makes a natural and potentially fatal border. The Tuareg corrects this loose etymological line, suggesting instead “that Scairbh na gCaorach mean[s] ‘crossing of ewes’ / for Scairbh means not ‘a ledge’ but ‘a ford’; or, more specifically, ‘a shallow ford’” (45–46). Significantly, his more accurate etymology allows for traffic along a natural and easy road; Scairbh na gCaorach’s official (not to say *OED*’s) meaning marks an original and geographic crossing

more than a border. The Tuareg transcends politically imposed borders or officially approved roads, trafficking what and where he will and following these natural crossings, etymological lines, and animal paths. In light of this other (apparently higher or prior) law, the unapproved trafficking of Muldoon and uncle shades into petty economic misdemeanour so that the 1987 Tuareg and the 1957 guard become slant-rhyming foils, each taking a different tack on cross-border traffic: the former as pro-mobility language police, beyond or before political and geographic divisions; the latter as threatening anti-mobility capital police, upholding the potentially fatal and parochial politics of the border.

Ultimately, the Tuareg's natural motion appears to make him immune or invisible to the latter, freeing him to set off down an "unapproved road" and resume his equine "jog trot" (47). The narrator is left at the post to recall the echoes of the Tuareg's final pronouncements:

"It had always been my sense," I hear him still, "that  
the goat fades into the goad  
and the spur fades into the flank  
and the fastness fades into no fixed abode

and the Black Pig's Dyke fades into the piggy bank  
and your Hams fade into your Japheths  
and the point fades into the point-blank

and the Cristal fades into the crystal meths  
where the ends somehow begin to fade into the means  
and the sheugh fades into the shibboleth

and the timbre fades into the tambourine  
and the quiddity fades into the *quid pro quo*  
and—you'll like this, I know—the bourne fades into the  
boreen." (49–60)

Lest we take the Tuareg's animal affinity for faith in the primal or natural connections of language and animal, place and people, these final didactic echoes recast his ancient wisdom as suspicious (pompous, maybe ironic) rather than serious. Out of the mouths of Tuaregs, the primary target of these lines is the identity politics that would locate individuals on one side of the religious and political divide according to name, geography, or accent (as the RUC man does); Redmond notes that accent and dialect remain "all-important signs of identity" in Northern Ireland, and shibboleths act as border posts that control "linguistic crossing-over" (106).

These final lines mobilize more than an allusive “sheugh” as naturalized language (a play on Heaney’s “Broagh”),<sup>21</sup> showing its fade into “shibboleth” just as the “point” fades ominously into the “point-blank.” And whether it critiques identity politics or just writes them large in the Tuareg’s exotic-cum-cosmopolitan nomadism, this final list also reverses the preposterous logic of poetry in motion, now stalled on its own cross-border traffic. The Tuareg’s pairs are laid out as logical if/then fades that seem as linear and inevitable as those of “Driving,” yet the ground of this logic itself fades in and out of different “timbres,” sometimes logical, sometimes aural, sometimes both. Rather than putting the cattle before the truck and the animal before the poem (the car or cart before or instead of the horse)—which would following the logic of prime animal mobility become automobile poetry in motion—these phrases instead begin to backtrack. They turn against their own forward flow of traffic so that the “timbre” comes before and fades into the “tambourine,” the quality of the sound effect coming before its originary instrument just as “the ends somehow begin to fade into the means” (56). So the “quiddity”—a Hopkinsian whatness-become-one of literal with figurative—fades into the political tit-for-tat and capital circulation of the “*quid pro quo*” (58); the initial “goat” (stubborn animal immobility?) fades into the efficiency of the cattle prod or “goad”; and despite the “spur” fading into the “flank,” this animal speed immediately grinds to a halt in the “fastness” which “fades” in turn into “no fixed abode” (49–51).

The final pun that fades “bourne” into “boreen” is particularly telling for its iffing and butting between roadblock and easy linguistic passage. “Bourne” flies in from Hamlet’s soliloquy about death as “the undiscovered Country; from whose Borne no Traveller returns” (III.i.79). On the logic of poetic currency or the accumulation of meaning-value, the word might then be taken to mean destination or goal, realm, or more accurately (as the Tuareg would have it), boundary, limit, or marker: either the end point of a journey along a one-way path, the roadblock along the way, or the fatal point (blank) of no return. And if we’re tracking etymologies by the logic of firsts, bourne might also refer to a Scottish stream, a burn, erasing any sense of the bourne as impassible or fatal boundary and turning it instead

21 Heaney describes in “Broagh” “that last / *gh* the strangers found / difficult to manage” (14–16). Muldoon plays or trades on this shibboleth in “The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants” (*Poems* 127–47), in which the sheugh hides Gallogly, an IRA man who has increasing difficulty with its “sh” rather than its “gh.” See Wheatley (132) and Redmond on the “sheugh” (107) and Wheatley on the “unfair [currency] exchange” of translation (128–29).

Rather than  
 putting the cattle  
 before the truck  
 and the  
 animal before  
 the poem (the  
 car or cart before  
 or instead of the  
 horse) ...

into the Tuareg's "shallow ford": that is, a boreen, a passable and natural path for animal and other traffic. But reading this boreen back into "Cows" by the logic of its own allusive currency, and alongside the troubled history of Ireland's cross-border traffic, any easy animobility or poetry in motion is thwarted by an ungetroundable roadblock, stopped in and by its tracks at the border of its own contingent logic made visible.

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