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Lyric Poetry and the Disorientation of Empathy

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Abstract: In the present essay, I argue that empathy constitutes the mode in which lyric poetry registers in the readers. However, unlike in prose, where the reader is allowed to empathize with the characters via the mediation of the narrator, in poetry, as Jonathan Culler and a number of other theoreticians of the lyric have indicated, the reader assumes the position of the speaker, thus becoming a *re*performer of the text. This positioning, in turn, creates a situation in which the text, rather than representing a mental state, embodies it and in the process of being enacted impels the reader to internalize this state. I then move on to complement this distinction between poetry and prose by noting the fact that critics who explore how empathy is employed in reading fiction appear to depart from assumptions of comprehensibility and stability of the representations of characters' mental states. This is shown in the analysis of the work of such critics as Suzanne Keen and Liza Zunshine. By contrast, in lyric poetry, empathy is both necessitated and simultaneously disoriented through the discontinuous, open-ended nature of the poetic text. As a result, the reader is perpetually made to feel into the speaker's evocations of mental states but his or her empathic efforts are thwarted by the operations of the text in which a given affect is being evoked and disarticulated at the same time. This dialectic of empathy and disorientation is a dynamic process that can take various forms. In the last section of the present essay, I analyze three poems, »Punishment« by Seamus Heaney, »The Loaf« by Paul Muldoon and »Geis« by Caitríona O'Reilly, in order to show how the empathic impulse is both triggered and disoriented by the tensions between the poems' denotative meanings and their formal features, mainly prosody and rhyme scheme. Thus, a tentative conclusion is that lyric poetry's formal complexity and its non-mimetic nature enter into a dynamic relationship with the propositional content – a dynamic which contributes to the continual disorientation of our empathic capacity that is the essential form of our performance of the poetic text. This tension may manifest itself in how form and content challenge each other or how they cooperate, which in either case leaves us with a rather uncom-

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fortable feeling of having witnessed not a representation of but an embodied, real-time moment of intimate and essentially aporetic experiential performance.

Keywords: empathy, lyric poetry, novel, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Caitríona O'Reilly.

Theories of empathy have increasingly been making inroads into the field of literary study, with the landmark monographs such as Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) both appearing in the first decade of the twenty first century, followed by *Rethinking Empathy through Literature* (2014), a collection of essays edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim. Those have recently been followed by a number of volumes focused on theories of empathy, particularly Heidi Maibom's *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (2017) and Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie's *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (2011), both of which devote a lot of space to the literary and aesthetic considerations of what it means to empathize with another. The ample representation of the empathic mode of reading in those studies centers on prose, assuming that characters embody mental states with which readers may empathize with various degrees of accuracy. While the majority of theoreticians of empathy conclude that only certain aspects of another's mental and emotional frame can be captured in literature and then »empathically re-enacted«f by the reader (Stueber 2006, 21), the general urge is to regard characters as (transient and situated) psychological wholes that the reader needs to uncover in the process of perusal.

Unlike prose, poetry gets incomparably less critical treatment in empathy-oriented readings. In what follows, therefore, I first provide an overview of the main tenets of empathic literary criticism as it has developed through the last two decades in order to demonstrate that, despite emphasis on the contingent and discontinuous nature of the interaction between the reader and the literary work, prose critics appear to depart from assumptions of comprehensibility and stability of the fictional representation of characters' mental states. The approach to empathy preferred by prose critics is then set against what I term disorienting empathy, which is an affective as well as cognitive attitude peculiar to how reading poetry affects our empathic faculty. In the subsequent section, the theoretical model is applied to three lyrics by contemporary poets, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon and Caitríona O'Reilly, so as to show, by means of textual analysis, how the disorientation is created through an interplay of the texts' formal features and their denotative content.

1 Empathy: Between Prose Fiction and Lyric Poetry

The present analysis departs from the widely-accepted definition of empathy as both a cognitive »capacity to understand another person's state of mind from her perspective« (Spoulding 2017, 13) and an ability to feel and emotionally respond »to what others feel or the situation they are in« (Maibom 2017, 22). Whether it is understood in cognitive or affective terms, the process of empathizing with another person, in life and, similarly, in literature, must follow one of two broad paths. Either we assume that what empathy replicates is the others' mental states, and so we only attend to their perceptions of the world and their inner thoughts and feelings; or in order to gain access to their mental state, we concentrate on the circumstances in which they have found themselves and consider our response to those, all the while paying heed to the fact that we are analyzing the circumstances from their particular vantage point. The former approach is designated as simulation, whereas the latter corresponds to the analytics of phenomenology.

Simulationists' method in the study of the novel can be traced to Bakhtin's »Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity«, in which he delineates a definition of aesthetic experience as beginning »at the point where we return into ourselves« (1990, 26) after first aligning our perspective with that of the hero. Thus, by being able to see more of the context in which characters find themselves, the readers can empathically project themselves into those characters. At the same time, Bakhtin stresses the necessity of maintaining a boundary between the reader and the hero because only by returning to themselves can the readers »start to form and consummate the material [they] derived from projecting [themselves] into the other and experiencing him from within himself« (1990, 26).[1] Such understanding of simulation is applied to reading and understanding fiction by Gregory Currie, who stresses that »readers of fiction simulate the state of a hypothetical reader of fact« so that I as a reader »simulate someone who is reading a factual account of [some character's life]« (1997, 68). For Currie, it is not enough that the readers are given the context of the character's life, for they must also come to view the character as an actual person who is suffering from a particular plight. The furthest step on the path to understanding another person's mental state, without distinguishing between actual people or literary characters, is taken by Amy Coplan, who argues that »empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while

1 This view of simulation is widely accepted as the mode of empathy with actual people (see Goldman 2006, 39 sq.).

maintaining clear self-other differentiation« (2014, 5). Both cognitive and affective, empathy, on Coplan's theory, results in »an observer's affective states [being] qualitatively identical to a target's, though they may vary in degree« (Coplan 2014, 6). What all these approaches share is a tacit acceptance of the fact that for empathy to take place there must be a mental state that the reader can relate to in one way or another. In a sense, Adam Morton provides a summary statement about how empathy works when he implies that simulation (though he does not use the term, he speaks of an interpretive process that closely resembles simulation) leads one to »make a mental model of mental states« (2017, 182).

Because the theory of literary empathy sets much stock by the fact that reading corresponds to the process of empathy as simulation, it is little wonder that a lot of the discussion of empathy in novels is centered around the notions of sensitivity to others' suffering and accuracy of representation. As regards broad issues of morality, Keen observes that while »fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers' feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action« (2010, 4), it is nevertheless the case that »narrative fiction may [...] enhance the potential for subjects to respond feelingly to situations and characters, disarming them of their customary suspicions and learned caution« (Keen 2010, 13). Even though novels do not necessarily lead to prosocial behaviors, they do enable readers to become more open to others' misfortunes. On the other hand, Zunshine concentrates on how we make sense of fiction by employing our theory of mind to help us comprehend characters' actions and mental states. Although Keen and Zunshine differ in their conclusions as to how and for what purpose we infer fictional characters' emotional and intellectual make-ups, they both employ a strikingly similar conceptualization of those characters, agreeing that part of the pleasure of reading lies in »›trying on‹ mental states [of characters] *potentially available* to us but at a given moment *differing* from our own« (2006, 17; see also Keen 2010, 34). Zunshine points out that this »trying on« is based on temporary, local and contingent insights that we can have into the characters' mental states so that »even the act of misrepresentation of the protagonist's thoughts and feeling does not detract from the cognitive satisfaction allowed by the reading of fiction.« However, she also cites approvingly James Phelan's claim that »chances are that the misrepresentation will yield less satisfaction than the more accurate interpretation« (quoted in Zunshine 2006, 25). The assumption here is that characters display objective mental states which we may interpret more or less correctly depending on our empathic (affective as well as cognitive) capacities. Reactions to fiction might be different but the encoded mental and affective states are there to be construed in the act of reading.

So as to avoid focusing exclusively on protagonists' own words and the narrator's rendition of their thoughts, theoreticians like Susan Feagin shift the defi-

nition of simulation toward a more phenomenologically-oriented stance in that empathizing with a character is for her a process of simulation »that is structurally, rather than functionally, similar to the process simulated« (2011, 161). Instead of mindreading, she advocates the reader's projection into the circumstances of the fictive narrative, thus responding to the world of the characters rather than to the characters' own attitude to their world. In the phenomenological lens, the study of fiction resembles a cultural exploration of conditions in which certain mental states arise. Much in this vein, when investigating the contemporary representations of work crisis in American novels, Sigrun Meining notes that the empathic attitude is triggered not by characters' mental states but by »the experience of the shared world of work« (2014, 107).[2]

Whether simulationist or phenomenological, applications of empathy to reading fiction tend to begin with the assumptions that, on the one hand, prose narratives conjure up certain mental states and, on the other, that the reader is able to simulate, reenact or reconstruct those states. Taking up both simulation and phenomenology, Keen thus defines literary empathy as »the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition« (2013). Although she insists that such empathy is a discontinuous process in which the reader engages with the text of the novel in complex ways, Keen's investigation of the empathic response of various readers to different works of fiction suggests that in most cases we conceive a coherent picture of the characters' mental states employing various formal devices to »contribute to the potential for character identification and thus for empathy« (2010, 93).[3] For her, the use of devices such as naming, indirect implication of traits or mode of representation of consciousness can help in shaping our perception of certain behaviors and traits, which, in turn, may effect changes in our ethical apparatus.

2 On the other hand, Husserlian philosophers such as Dan Zahavi or Heideggerians like Lou Agosta dismiss the possibility of an empathic encounter with a fictional character because, as Zahavi via Scheler observes, »there will remain something ineffable in the other. There is [...] an absolute intimate sphere of personhood that even the act of free communicative intention cannot fully disclose« (2016, 120). There is more to people than stories that comprise their consciousness and their identity, as a result empathy with the other is possible but only if we acknowledge »an otherness which resists or exceeds whatever narratives we bring to bear on him or her« (Zahavi 2016, 189). This idea corresponds to Paul Bloom's criticism of empathy as leading to partial and essentially irrational moral judgements, which »sway us toward the one over the many« (Bloom 2016, 14).

3 Keen's idea is informed by Virginia Woolf's claim that a character's particular power lies in »mak[ing] you think not only of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes« (Woolf 1924, 11).

By contrast, with poetry the idea of empathy is more problematic even if it is also essential to how lyric poems are read. Although in recent years lyric poetry has been argued to »dissolve into literature« and, more generally, into cultural production (Terada 2008, 199), a growing consensus is that due to its formal features, it represents a distinct form of linguistic creation.[4] One of the staunchest advocates of the separateness of the lyric is Jonathan Culler and it is his delineation of the genre that helps show that empathy lies at the core of how poems are experienced by readers.

Culler (2017, 35–38) distinguishes four features of lyric poetry that separate it from any other use of language: 1. the enunciative apparatus that cannot be reduced to the idea of the speaker but should instead be conceived as »creat[ing] effects of voicing, of aurality« that derives from the deployment of »rhyme, assonance, or alliteration, and rhythmic patterning«; 2. the non-mimetic ontology, whereby a lyric is regarded as an »attempt to be itself the event rather than the representation of an event«; 3. formally induced (again due to such devices as rhyme, refrain, prosody) ritualistic aspect of lyrics that »make[s] them texts composed for *re*performance«; 4. hyperbolic quality that »invest[s] mundane objects or occurrences with meaning«. For Culler, the lyric poem exists only in being reperformed by the reader, who at each enactment of the text assumes the position of the speaking I by lending it his or her own »enunciative apparatus.«[5] Therefore, the mental state set forth in the text, which never simply offers a representation but rather, as Culler stresses, is an embodiment of that state, registers in the reader-performer (the term adopted henceforth) via the work of empathy.

The idea that the reader-performer comes to understand and feel into the affect that the text invokes (which has often been the criterion for whether or not a poem is successful) was first put forward in the analysis of nineteenth century dramatic monologues, especially by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson. In a classic study of the genre, Robert Langbaum argues that the dramatic monologue seeks »to establish the reader's sympathetic relation to the poem« and stresses that this is achieved through the trope of »sympathy or projectiveness, what the Germans call *Einfühlung*« (1974, 73). Since the 1950s, when Langbaum wrote his book, *Einfühlung* has come to denote empathy in English and the way he views

4 Among the most important recent voices speaking for the distinctiveness of poetry are Don Paterson (2021) and Derek Attridge (2015).

5 Attridge makes a similar claim, when he argues that »the event of the poem takes place as part of the event of its reading« (2015, 29). In his study of the poem, Paterson pays much attention to how the music of the verse affects their denotative meaning but he too subscribes to the view that poems exist in the act of delivery and memorization so that »to recall a poem *is* the poem; the poem has become, quite literally, part of your being« (2021, 10, emphasis in original).

the dramatic monologue makes it a thoroughly empathic genre in that its essential feature is the capacity to instill a certain mental state in the reader-performer. When Culler (with Derek Attridge and Don Paterson agreeing) notes that lyric poems only exist in being reperformed, his idea extends Langbaum's insight to cover all lyric poetry. Whether the poem conjures a mental state in the speaking I or in some character that the I evokes, the reader-performer is led to empathize with this mental state. Therefore, unlike in fiction, where the reader, as Currie indicates, empathically engages with characters summoned by the narrator (it is immaterial whether we are dealing with the first-or-third-person narrator, as in either case we take the position of the listener rather than the performer), in lyric poetry, we as readers-performers are impelled to take the position of the speaker and so to directly internalize the mental state invoked by the text.

Furthermore, it is my contention here that empathic engagement which lyric poems necessarily initiate in us as readers-performers does not result in an understanding or intimation of a coherent affective gestalt, and that is because poetry is founded on »a gap or an excess in a text« (Hunter 2012, 73, 78; see also Albright 1985, 3). As a result, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argues, »there is no ›poetic experience‹ in the sense of a ›lived moment‹ or a poetic ›state‹«, both of which »can give rise to [...] a story, or to discourse, [to] ›literature‹, [but] not to a poem« (1999, 19), for we can only »talk of poetic *existence*, assuming existence is what at times puts holes in life, rending it to put us beside ourselves« (1999, 20, emphasis in original).[6] When we empathize with the speaker, we thus expose ourselves to an event of a tattered existence, untotalizable and never fully comprehensible. Thus, on the one hand lyric poems necessitate an empathic engagement, which represents their modus operandi proper, but on the other they thwart our efforts, creating a dialectic of decoding and disorientation to which we submit our empathic faculty in reperforming the text.

The notion that poetry offers a deployment of empathy that is distinct from prose has been probed separately by Anna Veprinska and Eve Sorum. Concentrating on poetry dealing with traumatic events, Veprinska argues that what she terms »poetic empathy« is a distinctive mode of exploring the mental states of, for example, victims of natural calamities, whose dramas the poems evoke through »some or all of the following: diction, trope, rhythm, rhyme, space, sound, stanzaic patterning, character, punctuation, mimesis, and genre« (2020, 3). Initiated by tropes and devices, the reader's empathic engagement does not result in a

6 Jacques Derrida identifies a similar aspect of poetry, when he observes, like Lacoue-Labarthe in regard to Paul Celan's work, that in reading a poem, one is always already setting off on a path to meet a figure of otherness, which can never fully made itself present. Hence, the gap between realizing the otherness at work in poetry and its apprehension (see Derrida 1986, 106 sq.).

complete simulation of another's experience, as poems »variously enact, invite, refuse, evoke, deploy, condemn, show interest in, and/or ambivalence toward empathy.« She terms such an ambiguous engagement »empathetic dissonance« (ibid., 3), claiming that our response to poems focused on traumas triggers an »oscillation between nearness and distance« (ibid., 7).

Where Veprinska sees the work of empathic dissonance in poetry dealing with war and natural calamities, Sorum points to a connection between empathy and poetic elegy, arguing that the »subject behind the empathetic act, rather than being in control and in a state of authority, is challenged and often threatened« by the endless complexity of the other's experience (2019, 15). Because elegies focus on evocations of individuals, they create images that summon the reader's empathic response but through their defamiliarizing use of language the process of building up empathic understanding is undermined. Thus, both Veprinska and Sorum, as well as theoreticians specializing in verse written by neuroatypicals like Ralph James Savarese (2014, 74–92), stress that it is the formal side of poetry that undermines the idea that mental states can be isolated and re-enacted. If, as has been argued above, the structure of the lyrical utterance understood as reperformance depends on our empathic faculty for its existence, the formal features of lyric poems prevent a full empathic matching on the part of the reader-performer, creating what I call a disorienting effect.

2 Empathic Disorientations: Heaney, Muldoon and O'Reilly

The claim that lyric poetry disorients our empathic response covers a field of complex interactions between form and propositional content, which can scarcely be reduced to a set of paradigmatic patterns. In what follows, I explore three lyrics – each of which not only depends on an empathic reperformance but also places empathy at the center of their preoccupations – in order to point up the kind of tensions that trigger empathic disorientation. While Heaney's »Punishment« and Muldoon's »The Loaf«, both adopting the genre of elegy, thematize empathy directly, as their speakers try to feel into the mental states of their addressees, O'Reilly's lyrical sequence »Geis« images forth an emotional collapse and depression in the speaker, who seeks to come to terms with her harrowing condition.

Published in *North* (1975), a collection as much celebrated as it is also polarizing, »Punishment« features the speaker considering an age-old body of a young woman who was executed for adultery. »Punishment«, along with a number of

other »bog poems«, was sparked off by Heaney's reading of P. T. Globb's *The Bog People* (published in English in 1969), which »centr[es] on the bog-preserved bodies of what seemed to be Iron Age victims of ritual execution« (O'Donoghue 2003, 527). The controversy surrounding the poem, as well as the entire collection, stems from the criticism that in *North*, according to Ciaran Carson, »it is as if there never were and never will be any political consequences of such acts« (1975, 184).[7] Among the many commentators of the collection, Fran Brearton and Floyd Collins have pointed up the context of empathy specifically in »Punishment«, noting two divergent effects of an empathic attitude the poem engenders. While Brearton notes in passing that »one criticism might be that while the poem professes empathy (›I can feel the tug / of the halter‹), it slips rapidly into objectification (›I can see her drowned / body‹)« (2009, 77), Collins suggests that the speaker's »empathy for the bog victims goes beyond mere identification of self-implication, as he recognizes the brutal nature of his own culture« (2003, 106). Whereas Brearton points to the failure of empathy in »Punishment«, Collins stresses its hypersensitivity in that through adopting an »other-oriented perspective,« the poet begins to comprehend his own situation from a vantage outside of his own consciousness. As we assume the position of the speaker, the evasions and tensions that the text initiates, its perpetuation of an ambiguous attitude to the girl, disorient our empathic efforts.

To do the disorienting quality of the text justice, we need to begin by attending to the dynamic between its insistence on empathic engagement, evidenced by the opening line, »I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape« (Heaney 1998, 117 sq.), which seems to refer to the speaker's own experience until line 3 identifies »her neck«, and what in the course of the poem becomes a radical rejection of empathy that reaches a climax in the unsettling last stanza: »[I] would connive / in civilized outrage / yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge«. It is not only the imagery that points to empathy, as the speaker ponders with a »sexually charged precision« (O'Donoghue 2003, 534) the tortured body of the »little adulteress«, but also the sonic effects of the poem's voicing. The two- and three-beat lines loosely follow the pattern of counterpointing the last foot in the first and last verse, so that the final cretic in »It blows her nipples« is paired with an amphibrach in »of her ribs« and similarly in »Under which at first« that is inverted in »oak-bone, brain-firkin«. This also applies to adjacent lines between stanzas, like »before they punished you«, whose final dactyl is counterpointed by an anapest in the ending of the subsequent line »you were flaxen-haired«, while throughout

7 Edna Longley has criticized *North* for being too simplistic in his treatment of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland (2001, 154). Similarly, Blake Morrison has argued poems like »Punishment« in particular credit »sectarian killing[s]« with »historical respectability« (1982, 68).

the poem where a line ends on an iamb, the next one tends to start with a trochee. Because of this insistent counterpointed rhythm, the scansion, though not free from possible variations in how particular verses can be intoned, creates an impression of the speaking subject and object coalescing in a ritualistic rhythm. This fusion is also suggested by the use of assonance that can link opening and closing lines: »tug« and »front« or »beads« and »ribs«, but can also introduce an intricate interplay of connectivity and counterpoint within a stanza as in the third one, where diphthongs connect lines 9, 11 and 12, with contrast signaled in line 10 that includes the low back vowel /ɒ/ in »bog«. Moreover, »voyeur«, immediately striking due to its paradoxical association with »artful« and Francophone origin, is a half-rhyme with »I know«; such half rhymes reappear at irregular intervals throughout the poem, linking not only line ends within one stanza but also across stanzas, like in line 24 »punished you« that half-rhymes with »beautiful« in line 27 in addition to both being dactyls.

What the poem's music reveals then is that at the level of sound, »Punishment« creates effects of connectivity between the poet and the dead girl, which corresponds to the speaker's initially declared almost-perfect perspective-taking. However, even when the poem interrupts the empathic engagement, which is first signaled when the speaker says »I can see your drowned / body«, a line often attacked for its objectification of the girl, the musical connectivity does not stop, as the stress pattern, assonance and half-rhymes continue to insinuate an air of counterpointed fusion. If »Punishment« concludes by rejecting empathy in favor of the »tribal, intimate revenge«, its aura of ritualistic affinity persists, as though at the pre-denotative level the speaker maintains an empathic connection to the girl. Thus, the impression »Punishment« creates in readers-performers, especially evident when read out loud, is that of a contrast between what Brain Massumi characterizes as emotion and affect.

Determined by semantic qualification of experience, emotion, according to Massumi, is »the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning« (1995, 88). By contrast, affect is characterized by intensity, which represents »incipience, but the incipience of mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression that are then reduced, inhibited, prevented from actualizing themselves completely« (Massumi 1995, 94). As a realm of emergent potentiality, affect is the virtual synesthetic perspective that is then limited by actual existence, with language (referred to by Massumi as »expression-event«) implied to be a vanishing point of affect's endless intensities. It is at the level of non-meaning, where Julia Kristeva places the semiotic process best articulated by poetry, that »Punishment« maintains its connection to the victim and only when we consider the »expression-event«, the propositional content

that Carson, among others, found so offensive, is the empathic link severed. As we reperform the poem, its sonic effects strengthen our empathic matching with the girl, impelling us to sympathize with her. Simultaneously, however, we are confronted with a disturbing enthrallment with the deceased body and a conclusion that jars with the affinity that we have been led to feel for her.

As in »Punishment«, empathy is the central preoccupation in Muldoon's »The Loaf« (*Moy Sand and Gravel*, 2002), which insists on an empathic connection between the speaker, and so us as readers-performers, and his Irish predecessors but in the formal, intertextual and imagistic tension between seriousness and levity, our empathic response to the plight of the immigrants to the US is disoriented. In each of its five stanzas, the poem focuses on the different sense, as the speaker first »put my finger to the hole they've cut for a dimmer switch« (Muldoon 2002, 47 sq.) only to »[scratch] a two-hundred-year-old itch«; he then goes on to apply his ear, nose, eye and finally his mouth to the said hole with equally unexpected results. In the middle stanza, the »two-hundred-year-old itch« turns out to be an image of a bedraggled nineteenth-century Irish navvy, one of the workforce who were employed at the construction of a series of canals that were to connect what was then the Midwest Region of the US, covering the states of Illinois and Indiana, with the eastern seaboard. This included the digging of the Raritan and Delaware canal in New Jersey, apparently the site of the speaker's house. Despite the initial assurances of the private contractors that the wages in the construction business would be stable, which attracted Irish immigrants, especially in the aftermath of the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century, the work soon proved both excruciating and the income unpredictable, which »The Loaf« evokes in the fourth stanza: »I see one holding horse dung to the rain / in the hope, indeed, indeed, / of washing out a few whole ears of grain«. The image is both realistic and suggestive of some borderline magical powers possessed by the navvy so that by the last stanza the speaker will have managed to »taste the small loaf of bread he baked from that whole seed«. Thus, the empathic connection is miraculously attained, as the speaker and the navvy share in a communal bread-breaking, as though some sort of peaceful resolution between them has been achieved. One is reminded of Heaney's elegy for Joseph Brodsky, which ends by imagining Brodsky's spirit following W. H. Auden's recommendation: »Do again what Auden said / Good poets do: bite, break their bread« (Heaney 2001, 66). Muldoon, however, goes a step further in his evocation of empathy, situating us in the position where we enter a communion between the living and the dead.

The moment evoked in the poem is given authority and gravity by the use of *terza rima*, though with a modified rhyme structure, as the middle stanza connects »flood-plain« with »hurricane« and »lain«. Despite its slightly altered

rhyme structure, »The Loaf«, through its employment of the *terza rima* and the motif of the return of the dead, alludes to another poem preoccupied with the afterlife, W. B. Yeats's »Cuchulain Comforted«. The similarity, however, is not only formal but also attitudinal, for Yeats's ironic, and partly sadistic, placement of his paragon of heroism after death among »Convicted cowards« (Yeats 1996, 332)[8] is mirrored by the tension in »The Loaf« between seriousness and playfulness, evinced by the change in tone. As the declamatory quality of the stanzas contrasts sharply with the refrain that verges on nonsensical nursery rhyme quality, the poem creates what is tonally an extremely jarring effect. After the middle stanza's evocation of rotting bodies of the Irish navvies, who were buried along the banks of the canals they worked on, the refrain comes close to impropriety: »*with a stink and a stink and a stinky-stick*«. And so sonically the poem goes two ways at once, on the one hand stressing the elegiac seriousness and on the other offsetting it with a ludic, singsong line, which suggests that the image of the complete perspective-taking is an illusion. The last refrain, though, is no longer so derisive, for it corroborates, however playfully, the tasting of the bread: »*with a link and a link and a linky-lick*«.

In his lecture on the authority of criticism, Attridge devotes a lot of attention to »The Loaf«, noting at one point that he expected the last sense summoned by the poem to be vision but it is taste that emphasizes the fact that the poet »seals a bond between himself and those other Irishmen who made a home (of sorts) in [the US]« (2006). The poem places us as readers-performers before an absolute choice between whether the bond Attridge speaks about does take place, even if only within the logic of the poem, or whether this is all horseplay. Discussing the importance of refrains in Yeats, Muldoon has suggested that they »represent at one fixity and structure, regularity and rupture, constancy and change« (2016, 156),[9] and these irresolvable tensions manifest also in how our empathic response is managed in »The Loaf«.

The empathic connection is, however, also problematized by the poem's voicing, which in »The Loaf«, like in a lot of Muldoon's poems, centers on the question of autobiographic reference of the first person singular. The poem insists on fusing the speaker with Muldoon, who at the time lived next to the Raritan and Delaware canal, whose father for a brief moment was a navvy back in Northern

8 The idea of Cuchulain finding himself among cowards in afterlife makes sense in the context of Yeats's idea of the Shiftings, a part of the soul's sojourn after death, that Yeats discuses in *A Vision*.

9 In the lecture, Muldoon develops a point first made about Yeats's use of refrains by Louis MacNeice, one of the most important influences on Muldoon (see MacNeice 1941, 164).

Ireland and who invoked the images that constitute »The Loaf« in a lecture delivered some two years before the composition of the poem:

> The third image is of a hole in an eighteenth-century plaster wall made by an electrician when he changed the position of an electrical outlet in our recently-bought house, a cross-section of this hole showing strands of the horse-hair once used to help bind mortar. The fourth image is of a man, an Irishman, one of the thousands who died in the early nineteenth century digging what would become the Delaware and Raritan Canal, which lies across the road from this house He's calling out to me I notice his feet are wrapped in rags, to save his instep from the relentless spadework. (Muldoon 1998, 107)

In view of this information, »The Loaf« suggests not only that the connection between the living and the dead is forged in some notional moment of enunciation but that this is a connection between Muldoon and his ancestors, who include his father, after whose demise in 1985, as Muldoon has confessed, there was nothing that held him in Northern Ireland. Such accumulation of autobiographical details is counterpointed by the overtly lyrical structure of the poem, which for Culler cancels out the figure of the author-poet. Whether as an autobiographical fact or a poetic persona, the interposition of the speaker turns the lyric poem into a mimetic statement, which is at odds with Culler's claim, made via Käte Hamburger, that »we experience the lyric statement as a reality statement« (Hamburger 1973, 271). Muldoon's own claims about the compositional process, which he has been making with remarkable consistency over the last thirty years, suggest a similar view: »the only state in which I think anything half-decent might get done is to be humble before the power and the possibility of language, to let it have its way with you, as it were« (Keller 1994, 27).[10] Strung between allusions to Muldoon's own persona and the permission for language to govern the creative process, »The Loaf« thrives on the tension between mimesis and embodiment. For while it mimetically implies that the empathic connection is only figural, the way Paul Muldoon tries to come to terms with his heritage, »The Loaf« voices a statement about the reality in which the living can and perhaps should empathize with the experiences of the dead.

Therefore, unlike »Punishment«, which sets up the disorienting mode of empathy in the dialectic between prosody and rhyme on the one hand and the declarative disarticulation of empathy on the other, »The Loaf« disorients our empathic efforts on every level, from the formal aspects like rhyme and refrain to the idea of the origin of lyric expression. As the gravity intrinsic to the elegiac

10 Elsewhere Muldoon mentions that allowing a poem to be written through one is akin to having »had some kind of affair« with the language (Donaghy 1985, 82). He has reiterated this view in various configurations in many recent interviews.

nature of the poem is offset by its tonal levity, »The Loaf« insists on the maintenance of a total empathic connection and simultaneously on an absolute illusoriness of any protestations that we as readers-performers can achieve a full perspective-taking.

Whereas in both »Punishment« and »The Loaf«, we are situated in the position of speakers attempting to set up an empathic link with their addressees, O'Reilly's »Geis« (*Geis*, 2015) evokes an emotional state in the speaker herself, impelling us to internalize her tormented mental state through the work of empathy. The title Irish word signifies a prohibition or injunction of a preternatural sanction widely evoked in early medieval Irish saga-literature and it is with a ban on talking about depression that the poem grapples. In this sense, »Geis« continues in the tradition of poetry as a way of self-healing but unlike such alleviation-seeking works as Sylvia Plath's bee poems or some of the epigrams in Robert Lowell's *Day by Day* (1977), »Geis« (O'Reilly 2015, 23–30) reposes trust in empathy between fellow sufferers as a means to overcoming the depression, as the speaker finds in other inmates' dreariness a similar sort of darkness that clouds her.

In »Leaven«, she regards »An old lady« completely withdrawn into her inner world, »a lost comet« about to »depart«, whose condition, like that of the tormented patients in »Isolate and Preserve«, foretells the speaker's future unless she can overcome the illness. The concluding poem of the sequence, »Jonah«, evokes what appears to be a successful recovery and vests the poet's hopeful attitude in being accompanied by »Brothers«, who, similarly to her, »have gone down to the roots of the mountain, / and have seen the worm bite the gourd's root«. Bearing in mind the reperformative nature of poetry, what »Geis« implies is that provided we can empathically assume the position of the speaker, we will also be able to feel into the other sufferers, thereby contributing to their healing process. In this sense, O'Reilly's sequence points to poetry as a therapeutic practice insofar as through impelling us as readers-performers to empathize with the afflicted, poems can make us conversant with and accepting of their emotional depredation. And yet, in spite of how great a premium is placed on empathy, »Geis« keeps disorienting our empathic faculty, suggesting that, to adapt Yeats's phrase, mental states, especially as fraught as the one conjured in the sequence, can be embodied in the text but cannot be known.

The elusive nature of extreme emotional states is first implied by the fact that none of the poems comprising »Geis« chooses to name them. The opening lyric evokes feeling trapped, »hedge-snared / on a trunk of a writhing stone«, which recurs in the titular poem of the sequence that connects entrapment with the family home and language. Because »Containment is in / the nature of a house«, the speaker comes to an excruciating realization that she cannot speak openly

about her condition, and so »The wound of the mouth closes« as »a radiant stone is placed on the tongue«. The »stones of silence« that the speaker of »Punishment«, as the male »connive[r] / in civilized outrage«, »would have cast« come back in »Geis« to haunt another female victim of an oppressive society, not so much scapegoated by tribal culture as rather abandoned like a species that has failed to assimilate to the demands of her community. In effect, empathy as the sole method of healing becomes the one thing that she is denied, as abandonment leads to masochism and perpetual considerations of self-dissolution.

In »Night-Sweat«, the poet dreams that »pointed flames out of Bosch / scorch me hotter / than any bitch burned by history«. The alliteration, the suggestion of caesura between the two amphibrachs in the first quoted line and the forceful tempo of the two trochees in the second line all point to the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition that left little space for those unable to fit in the prescribed social fabric. The music of the lyric continues the masochistic torment in the last stanza:

> Now I am straddled by a great night bird,
> a muscular talon to each hip bone.
> How I struggle to bare him up:
> his soaked wing hover.

The image goes back to Yeats's »Leda and the Swan«, with its invocation of »the great wings beating still / above the staggering girl« (Yeats 1996, 214), but also to Ted Hughes's »Hawk Roosting« whose »feet are locked upon the rough bark« (Hughes 2003, 68). Both these intertexts point to a domination of a violence-obsessed masculinity that thrives on the abuse of the weaker, which in both poems is identified as the woman. In O'Reilly, though, this goes further, as the lyric indicates that in spite of the clear abuse, the speaker's struggle is not to break free but to »bare him up«, as her captor's success, what Yeats's poem imagines to be »the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead« (Yeats 1996, 214), but also his future exoneration become her responsibility. The religious undertone of the last two lines is cemented by the reference to the opening of the Corpus Christi Carrol: »The falcon hath born my make away / He bore him up, he bore him down, / He bore him into an orchard brown« (»The Corpus Christi Carol« 2005, 83, ll. 2–4). Thus the implication, like in Yeats and partly in Hughes, is that accepting male violation gives credit to the woman, who is now shown the sacred, if fierce, power of the »great night bird«. The perverse grandeur of these lines is echoed by the heaviness of the rhythm in the endings of the two opening lines of the stanza; rare in English-language poetry, the concluding molossuses slow down the already ponderous rhythm of the poem, forcing pauses between the final words in »great night bird« and »each hip bone«.

There is no medicine for the depressed state, for administering »the drug« may be »almost love« but it results in the dissolution of the self: »Stiff petals, wet wrinkled wings // coil around nothing« and »Then I am spilled scatheless // from the casing dark«. Compared to the »soaked wings« of the hovering »night bird«, the poet is diminished and unable to move except as a will-less fluid self. Unlike the alliteration of »bitch burned by history« that exudes energy of plosive self-recrimination, the fricatives in »spilled scatheless«, in addition to being less heavily stressed, cooperate with the grammar of the clause to emphasize the speaker's passivity. On the other hand, »Riddle«, loosely echoing Hughes' »Lineage« and »Examination at the Womb Door«, evokes a manic self-interrogation, which contrasts with the celebration of the Crow's tricksterish potency and endurance in Hughes (Hughes 2003, 218 sq.). O'Reilly's poem deploys anaphor with what strikes as another masochistic self-entrapment: »It is a purple knot of violence in the head«. And yet, after this harrowing self-examination, the poet comes out victorious and recovered. »Jonah« recalls the process of self-dissolution, using the vocabulary of the earlier lyrics: »A darkness swallowed me whole. / I subsisted in its guts, in a foetal coil«. But all this is now behind her, as the poet in the radiant company of her »Brothers« can »see with the light behind us«. This healing, though, involves not only the empathic understanding but also the ability to speak of her condition: »The way a word unlatches a door, / [...] / To refuse is not to live«, a motto that she repeats to her company: »Brothers, to refuse is not to live. / The world has eaten us the way the world must«. The soothing aura of »Jonah« implies that the poet has become a therapist of sorts, using words not only to communicate her own torment but also to show others the path to recovery, which is indicated in the quotation from the prophet Jonah (2:5): »*The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth / closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head*«.

Thus, while on the one hand »Geis« thematizes the therapeutic role of empathy, indicating that the mutuality it fosters helps heal depressive states, on the other hand it stresses that the experience of depression ultimately eludes comprehension. The elision of naming the affliction along with the speaker being abandoned to the condition that she cannot make sense of controvert the idea that empathy can be won through poetic evocation. As we move through the various stages of her emotional breakdown, the poem's imagery, tone and rhythm emphasize the painful immediacy of the poet's struggle but also stress its ineffable nature. The formal intricacy of the lyrical structure of »Geis«, rather than shed light on the nature of depression, continues to lead us astray. As a result, we are simultaneously compelled to reenact the speaker's depressed state in an act of empathic internalization and forced to concede that her experience must remain largely impenetrable to us. While »the head of a dissected body might still sing, /

its mouth still utter bright notes«, this performance of pain that is to ensure that »greenness continues« still eludes our empathic effort, »*leaving* [us] *astonished*« at the »one who feeds on shadows«.

3 Conclusions

I have argued that lyric poetry demands that we empathize with the speakers, as we reperform the text, seeking to make the evoked mental states our own. And yet, the way the above-discussed poems operate the work of empathy shows how in the tensions between form and content, and between rhythm and statement empathy is urgently called for but at the same time proves impossible to apprehend. In »Punishment« and »The Loaf«, we are led to empathize with characters that the poems evoke, the young victim of tribal retribution and the representative of mid-nineteenth-century Irish navvies. Although the poems compel us to try to establish a contact with those others, to form coherent pictures of their suffering, they confuse our response, simultaneously stirring our empathic faculty and disorienting it. On the other hand, instead of conjuring characters for us to empathize with, »Geis« impels us to feel into the harrowed mental stated of the speaker herself. Here, empathy is additionally emphasized as therapeutic, as we reperform and so internalize the speaker's evocation of her mental state, we come to participate in the healing process. This goal is, however, disarticulated by the text, which stresses that depression cannot be apprehended in words. In all these three cases, we as readers-performers are faced with a dialectic of proximity and distance, as the poems structurally insist that we empathize with the speakers' evocation of mental states but at the same time inject the texts with irresolvable ambiguities.

The tentative conclusion is therefore that lyric poetry's formal complexity, the non-mimetic real-statement nature that Culler argues is a characteristic feature of the lyric, enters into a dynamic relationship with the propositional content – a dynamic which contributes to the continual disorientation of our empathic capacity that is the essential form of our performance of the poetic text. This tension may manifest itself in how form and content challenge each other or how they cooperate, which in either case leaves us with a rather uncomfortable feeling of having witnessed not a representation of but an embodied, real-time moment of intimate and essentially aporetic experiential performance.

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