

# Interview with Paul Muldoon

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*The interview has been condensed and edited.*

**David-Antoine Williams:** What were your early experiences with dictionaries? Do you have any early memories of having them in the home, or of using them, whether at school or at home?

**Paul Muldoon:** The first dictionaries I remember using—which is not to say they were the first ones I used—would have been for the languages I was studying. So, Latin (I'm sure would have been a very early one) French, and Irish. I'm sure I had an English dictionary but I can't visualize it, whereas I can certainly visualize the Irish dictionaries, partly because they're two major dictionaries. There's one from English to Irish by a guy named De Bhaldraithe, and the main one from Irish to English by a guy called Dinneen. So I spent a lot of time working around these, and also the French dictionary, because I studied French poetry as a teenager. I studied Irish poetry and Irish literature in Irish—Gaelic, that's to say. But I don't remember having a dictionary in the house. I do remember having a *kind* of dictionary in the house: that's to say an encyclopedia, which is, obviously, set out in alphabetical style, like most dictionaries. It was a 'dictionary' in which I immersed myself. I'm sure as I was looking up a particular word—as I still do—I was finding words lurking around it—within earshot, as it were—of the one I was supposedly looking for. So, I enjoy the adventure of the lexicon. I'm interested in words and what they mean, and I use a dictionary all the time.

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D-AW: What dictionaries do you use now?

PM: Well, I use primarily the OED. I use the thirteen-volume OED. I had a two-volume OED, whenever that came out, I suppose in the 80s, but I couldn't be bothered with it. So I sold it, I more or less traded it in for the thirteen-volume, which I consult I would say on a daily basis.

D-AW: You don't use any of the electronic interfaces?

PM: I don't. I think maybe I have a connection to the *OED Online*. I enjoy the physicality of the OED. I enjoy reaching up and ...

D-AW: Is it above your head?

PM: At the moment it is above my head. For a while there it was more or less at shoulder level, or perhaps lower. I had it on a particular bookshelf. And I still have it on a particular bookshelf, but high up.

D-AW: I'm interested in this idea of the physicality of the book. It necessitates presenting the information in some kind of order or ordered relation, for example alphabetical order. But the order is itself arbitrary.

PM: Yes, of course it is.

D-AW: And the print OED presents those contextual words, as you say, 'within earshot'. The online interfaces don't, in the same way. Most often, the entry you see is the one you looked up.

PM: Well I'm always interested in the adventure of setting out to find the meaning of a particular word, or to check the meaning of a particular word, and I check often. I look again at what I think I might know about the meaning of the word, and sort of confirm that, as it were, or make a discovery about it. When the electronic version of it came out, I was asked to review it by a magazine, which I thought was a bit strange.

D-AW: Because it is electronic?

PM: No, because one was being asked to review a dictionary. Or at least I was being asked to review a dictionary.

D-AW: Why was that strange?

PM: Well, the thought of reviewing a dictionary is a rather tall order. I mean one would have to read it, I assume, to review it. It was an indicator though that somebody had an idea that dictionaries might be something I was interested in, so I presume that's why they asked me. But in any case, yes, I check ... I encourage my students to check as many of the resonances of the words they use as they possibly can.

D-AW: By ‘resonances’ do you mean the various shades of meaning or sense, or are there more things that are resonating in a word than its senses?

PM: I’d say primarily its senses—the present senses in which it is used now, the senses in which it has been used. Because obviously words change all the time. And there are usages that have now entered the language that are at some level still problematic. Not because one wants the language to be stuck, but just because people don’t quite understand what the words mean. A classic case would be the use of the word *careening*. A motorcar ‘careening round the corner’, which has now more or less entered the language, but which is basically a misinterpretation of the word *career*. It’s the word *career* that’s really meant. The word *careen* means something else. But that confusion is now so generalized that the word *careen* now means ‘to career’. Right?

D-AW: Right. Did you know that in the updated *OED Online*, you are quoted under *mid-career*?

PM: Are you kidding?

D-AW: I’m not. You’re the most recent evidence citation.

PM: I didn’t know that. For using the term *mid-career*? I actually remember using that now.

D-AW: In the line ‘bounding, vaulting, pausing in mid-career’. Did that fall in mid-career? 1998?

PM: Well it wasn’t necessarily my mid-career. I have no idea what that would be.

D-AW: Are there any other dictionaries on your shelves?

PM: I do have a couple of dictionaries. I have a *Webster’s*, which I don’t really use so much. And I have a *Collins Dictionary*, quite a modern *Collins Dictionary*. It’s quite up to the moment, and it’s basically a British usage dictionary.

D-AW: There’s a moment in one of the Oxford lectures where uncharacteristically you cite that *Collins English Dictionary*, instead of the OED, which you had been citing the entire rest of the book.

PM: [*laughs*] I think you’re right. Yeah.

D-AW: Do you remember why that one popped in there?

PM: [*laughing*] I don’t. I don’t remember what it was, but I think you’re right. Whatever it was I honestly don’t know.

D-AW: I wondered whether there might have been something in that definition that wasn’t present in the OED?

PM: Quite possible. Because there are I think modern English nuances that the OED, or at least the edition of it that I have, doesn’t have. I realize that there are occasionally moments when the dictionary is not good enough.

D-AW: Which is an interesting point about the authority of this ‘authority’.

PM: Well yeah, I mean, because well the OED is notorious—I refer to this several times—it’s quite dismissive of words that might have a Gaelic or a Celtic provenance. It’s almost universally dismissive of any suggestion that a word might have come into English from Irish.

D-AW: Which you contest a few times in essays and poems.

PM: I do. Because I find it a little troubling. I wouldn’t want to say that it’s contemptuous of the Irish, but on the other hand I’m not quite sure that it can mean anything else. In any case, I’ve noticed it again and again, with usages and etymologies. They will say ‘there is a suggestion that this comes from the Irish word whatever, but it’s highly unlikely’. Highly unlikely, they say.

D-AW: Can I ask you about Newton’s *Dictionary of Birds*?

PM: Oh yeah. I mention that somewhere.

D-AW: In ‘Nightingales’.

PM: Oh yeah. Now that actually may even come from the OED.

D-AW: That’s what I wondered. I wondered whether you had that book of Newton’s or found it under *nightingale* in OED.

PM: I think I did. I’m pretty sure I did. But I may then have gone and looked it up in the book. I don’t even remember—what’s in the OED? It’s quite extensive actually, the OED quote from it.

D-AW: It’s exactly the number of words that you quote in the poem.

PM: Okay, fair enough. I do that from time to time. I’ve done that with another ‘dictionary’—I would use the word *dictionary* in a fairly broad sense. I would use it to include in a strange way for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to which I constantly, or at least have in the past, alluded a lot.

D-AW: In that way the dictionary resembles also commonplace book, full of selections or gobbets of text.

PM: That’s right. Well certainly one of the things that I enjoy about the OED, which I assume is there on the online version also, is the extensive history of usage. I suppose they try to get the first usage, and then a few other key usages along the way.

D-AW: Why is the first usage important or interesting to you?

PM: Well, I suppose I just happen to be interested in the history of language, and when words come into the English language, and by what medium of exchange. Quite apart from—maybe not *quite* apart from, but somewhat apart from—trying to write poems. I’m interested in history. I’m carrying

two books at the moment. One of them is about Pompeii and one is about Elizabethan daily life. I'm at least as interested in any of that as I am in anything else.

D-AW: Do you see a relation between that kind of history and the history of words?

PM: I would say so, sure. In the case of William Shakespeare, when you think of the number of words he coined, and the way he extended the language, I suppose in some way to make it equal to its era, and equal to what he himself needed, or what his work needed.

D-AW: One of the things about history that applies also to word histories, and maybe even more so, is that histories are always stories, drawing on some kind of evidence with a lot shaded in between.

PM: *Some* kind of evidence, yeah.

D-AW: So do you think there's a difference between an etymology or a word history that is true, or real, and one that is either mistaken, or invented?

PM: I think it's very difficult to distinguish them, sometimes. Yesterday, I was talking to a cab driver, and he was talking about how he was brought up in the area of the Elephant and Castle. We know that that place certainly doesn't have to do with an Elephant. It has to do with *l'enfant de castile*. But whether or not that actually advances anything, I'm not sure. I mean, it's interesting to know that the present usage is a corruption of that term, but I'm not sure if knowing that actually necessarily advances our understanding of it. Because the next thing one has to figure out is what *l'enfant de castile* means. And in a strange way I'm not sure if one is more significant than the other.

D-AW: To put it slightly differently, or to give an example, in a poem of yours called 'Ontario', there's a moment at the end where the 'I' says to a young woman, 'a lens is really a lentil, a pulse' as a sort of reply to the woman saying 'are you for real?' I wonder what the significance of the 'really' in that line—'is *really* a lentil, a pulse'—a pulse which then in turn links to a different kind of 'pulse' (a homonym: her heart's pulse). But I wonder if between the sarcastic 'are you for *real*?' and the academic reply, 'a lens is *really* a lentil' there's an appeal to some kind of unknown reality behind things, behind words, however uncertain or mistaken ideas about that might be.

PM: It probably varies from case to case. I think in that poem it might be thinking about the notion of what's real there, in the colloquial usage 'are you for real'. I'm not sure ... I don't know. I'm not sure how much store I would put in that. I think probably the speaker is having a bit of fun with coming back on the ... that this is what *is* for real in some sense, but it's words, names. Of course it's not *really* a lentil. It's a word that derives from the word *for* a lentil. So there's a certain amount of unpacking to be done there. Because it's similar in shape to a lentil.

D-AW: It starts in a sort of metaphor: a lens is *like* a lentil. It's a reapplication of a word to something that is other than the thing.

PM: Yes. That's right.

D-AW: But the poem itself, like a lot of poems that you write, thinks about changing from one thing to another, and when one thing becomes something else, and the blurry transition between either images, or ideas, or words.

PM: I'm sure that's right. And they operate, you know, from time to time, in that foggy area. There's a poem called 'The Right Arm', which uses this thing about the relationship between the Irish place name Eglish and *ecclesia* and *église*. And perhaps in a similar kind of way, in a musing way, I mean not necessarily entirely solemn way ...

D-AW: Playing off the solemnity of the church?

PM: There's a bit of that, probably. I think there's a reference to stained glass in that? So that's part of it, I think. But when you begin to take these things apart they're somewhat fragile in the little connections that they're making, you know?

D-AW: Yes. But at the same time that poem 'The Right Arm' seems to—at least retrospectively from the point of view of an older, educated mind—invest something in that connection, in knowing that.

PM: Well I think that's right. In fact the speaker says that.

D-AW: 'I'd give my right arm to have known ...

PM: 'Then what I know now ...

D-AW: 'How Eglish was itself wedged between *ecclesia* and *église*.' Something like that. Just as the poem about The Beatles album looks back retrospectively and says, 'ah, there's an etymological play there that I didn't see the first time'.

PM: That's right. There's some sort of disconnect there though about ... somebody has written about this<sup>1</sup> ... was the 'White Album' known as the 'White Album' at the time?

D-AW: Almost immediately after, yes, because it had just 'The Beatles' on a white background.

PM: I'm not so sure if there's quite as much connection there between the *album* and the *white* as the poem is suggesting.

D-AW: Well, the poem sees, if not an etymological pun (and surely there was no pun intended in the making of the jacket or the later pseudonym) the possibility of making an etymological pun.

PM: Yes I think that's right. They were not in fact doing that.

D-AW: Almost certainly not.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Robbins, 'Paul Muldoon's Covert Operations' in *Modern Philology* 109.2 (2011): pp. 266-99.

PM: Yeah, I'm sure that's right. Whereas if Joyce had been in command, he might have been.

D-AW: In 'The Right Arm' the retrospective knowledge of a word's history leads to that metaphor of the town as a church, almost Dickinsonian place-as-architecture, as building, with the stained glass above.

PM: Yes, and ... ha. Does it suggest that the stained glass is overhead? It does, doesn't it? Which I realize now that you say that is maybe inspired or informed by Frost's 'Birches'—I think it's in 'Birches'—where he has some reference to 'the inner dome of heaven' having fallen. It hadn't occurred to me really until you mentioned it there. Yes ... Dickinson. The thing about her, I have to go back and study her really I think. She's amazing. Quite phenomenal.

D-AW: Also very interested in her dictionary, which was Webster's 1844.

PM: I don't know as much about Emily Dickinson as I should. I even hesitate to say that I've read them. I mean I *have* read them, but I'm not sure it's really established what it is we're reading. It's closer than it was a few years ago, with those Harvard editions, but I don't know if it's entirely fixed yet. But in any case, Emily. So did Emily spend a lot of time checking out the dictionary?

D-AW: Consulted it 'as a priest his breviary'.

PM: Did she say that?

D-AW: It was Martha Dickinson Bianchi who said it about her.

PM: I know that people in my own case have said, 'this guy must spend his life with his nose in the dictionary, and all these strange words that he uses that are not in everyday use'. In some sense I do spend a lot of time looking things up, but I don't go looking for words, which is I think what some people might imagine poets doing. In other words, if I'm writing something and the idea of a usage comes up ... for example, a technical term came up the other day. There are a couple of versions of it. The word is *sneal*, or *swale*, a technical term for scorching or singeing a pig. And it happened to be the word I needed.<sup>2</sup> And how did I get to it? Eventually I was stuck looking at a few words associated with pigs, I suppose, and happened on this one. And then I went to the OED actually to check it out. And whatever the first spelling of it that was given, it didn't appear there, so I had to look around for another version of it before I found it in the OED. So some of these words are certainly uncommon. We don't use *sneal* on a regular basis. But it is nonetheless a technical term which is absolutely spot on in this particular poem, which has to do with research on pigs. Modern, contemporary research on pigs in a burn unit. Or at least that's part of the milieu. So I suppose I'm stuck actually, as I was in that case ... I was writing a poem in rhyme as it turns out, and this word was absolutely perfect for that use in that context. So it was as if it was saying to me, 'I'm the one'.

D-AW: Does it rhyme with *squeal*? I mean in the poem?

PM: I don't think it rhymes with *squeal*. I can't remember. It's more of a half or quarter rhyme.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Muldoon, 'Tusker' in *One Thousand Things worth Knowing* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015) pp.75-6.

D-AW: So, what you're saying is that your trips to the dictionary are demanded by the poem as it is being written, and not the other way around.

PM: That's right. I'd say in general, yeah. I suppose from time to time over the years I've happened on a word ... funnily enough I was thinking of a word this morning that came to me partly because of this book that I'm reading just now, about Elizabethan day-to-day life: the word *jakes*. It's associated with two things—another poem I've just written based on a painting by a man named Jacque,<sup>3</sup> and also the fact that, being brought up where I was brought up, we used the word *jakes* as school kids for a toilet.

D-AW: I know that meaning. I don't know *how* I know it.

PM: Probably Shakespeare. Certainly it is an Elizabethan usage. So that word, I minded, was a usage that would be perfectly appropriate somewhere down the road, if I were writing something set in the 1950s in Ireland. Which is not to say necessarily that I'm going to write a poem called 'Jakes', but it's not inconceivable. But that would be far less often the case than the other thing I'm describing to you.

D-AW: Is it ever the case that a poem sends you to the dictionary and what you see there 'within earshot' or on the page or even within the definition turns the poem in a different direction.

PM: Possibly. Quite likely. I can't give you an example of that but I imagine so. That's one of the reasons I tell my students to be as conscious as they possibly can of every aspect a word might ripple out. What its various connotations might be, what it might summon up to—I suppose—a reader coming down the pike.

D-AW: Yet the poem itself has to forge those connections as well, doesn't it? Or that's one of the things that a poem has to do?

PM: I think it does, but I think it's just one of the ways in which poems may be informed. One example that comes to mind of Frost's, who is one of my favorite poets, has to do with the word *blank*, and blank verse, and blankness. A kind of awareness that I think he has, that is not necessarily the first thing one needs to know about reading his poems, but could be useful. So it's as likely a source of connections being made as anything else.

D-AW: Many of your poems are not only built on connections, but actively make connections, and chains of connections, whether they be of images or sounds or ideas, or whatever. And I've noticed recently there seems to be a form that's emerging in which that chain ends up at the beginning. Like 'Vico' some time ago, there seem to a lot of poems recently that come back to the start.

PM: That's right. In fact probably one or two too many. There's one book, *Maggot*, where one of the obsessive aspects of 'maggotting' has to do with things coming around again. And there are lots of round songs, or versions of them.

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<sup>3</sup> Muldoon, 'Charles Émile Jacque: Poultry among the Trees' in *One Thousand Things worth Knowing*, pp. 14-20.

D-AW: I'm thinking of 'The Rowboat' in *Maggot*.

PM: Yes, absolutely. It's particularly the case in that book, and I suppose now occasionally I find it about to happen—and ordinarily one would be inclined to let happen what it seems to want. I think then there are times when one has to intervene, and say, 'I'm sorry', you know, 'we can't have another of that' ... it's going to be too embarrassing when I'm having this conversation with you. Because you or somebody else is going to say, 'aren't there too many of these round songs?' So I have to do something about that by preempting it in some way. The argument for letting it happen is Coleridge's argument about all narrative having to do with the snake eating its own tale. And you say well actually it's the argument from life, it's the argument from being born wearing diapers and growing up and wearing diapers again, it's the argument of the seasons.

D-AW: 'Dust to dust...'

PM: Yeah, exactly. And it's the strongest argument there is. So, you know, one might counter, 'what's your problem?' But the other side of it is you don't want every poem to be like the next one. It's okay I think in a book, just about, to be seen as one of the principles which over a period of a few years has informed how things got done.

An image I've become quite impressed with, as I've watched the new World Trade building rising, is of its being built by a crane within its own structure, which will disappear when it's built. And it's probably not a fair analogy, but it's something like that. There are ways in which these things get made that are more useful in just getting them up there, or out there, than anything else. And a lot of these poems, it wouldn't be clear even to me the principles on which they were constructed. A lot of them were like wedge-like things, they sometimes go in a few directions at once.

D-AW: I think 'The Windshield' does that. It sort of meets itself at the middle and then reflects back out.

PM: I think it might. But again it's of no particular use, I'm not sure. One would like to think it had to do with more than a way of getting the thing done, but ...

D-AW: I mentioned *mid-career* to you. Would you like me to tell you some other words which you're quoted for?

PM: Sure. Yes. I honestly don't know about this. I didn't realize I was in the OED.

D-AW: Well you might not be in your own OED.

PM: No, I'm not.

D-AW: And you'd have no way to know of course because you'd have to read the whole thing to find yourself. But a computer can find you quite easily in the more recent OEDs.

PM: So these are things for which something I have written is cited as evidence? Tell me about it, I actually don't know this.

D-AW: Yes, almost always the most recent citation. Tell me if any of these strike you as interesting or not. So: *miscue* is one, from *Hay*.

PM: *Miscue*? That's interesting. *Miscue* ... is that a word you would know?

D-AW: I would know it as a synonym for a ...

PM: ... failed prompt or something?

D-AW: Yes.

PM: Whereas in fact, what it refers to here is a snooker or billiards shot that has gone wrong. Interesting. I wonder who's doing this. Someone with too much time on their hands ...

D-AW: Well, it is their job, so ...

PM: [*laughing*] Yes.

D-AW: I mentioned *mid-career*. There's *middle-distance* ... a lot of these are compounds ...

PM: *Middle-distance*?

D-AW: Yes, in *New Weather*: 'they still inhabited | The middle distances'.

PM: Yes, I can see how that might not be a common usage at all. We usually talk about 'the middle distance'.

D-AW: Some of them are a bit more exotic, at least to me: *milty*, *alala*, *shmeer*.

PM: Interesting, yeah. *Milt* obviously refers to fish sperm. I'll have to go and read about this.

D-AW: *Acetyline*. The verb *to nipple*.

PM: *To nibble*?

D-AW: *Nipple*. *To nipple*. 'That pair of warts nipping...' which I think does become 'nibbling' later on in the poem.

PM: *Acetyline* I would have thought would be a fairly common word.

D-AW: Some are quite common. The verb *to rock*: 'It rocked as though it might never rest.' Some are *recherché*: *quannet*. And you're quoted for some clichés, which I know you like to use quite a lot: 'It's not over till the fat lady sings', under *over*.

PM: Yeah, that's weird; because that's quite a well-known expression I would say.

D-AW: *Open sesame* as well.

PM: That's very weird. Do you know what this suggests to me?

D-AW: Tell me.

PM: They don't know what they're doing.

D-AW: Is the idea that there should be something distinctive about the evidence?

PM: Oh, I see what you're saying. These of course are just usages—recent usages. Yeah, okay. For some reason I was thinking that they should be more distinctive than that. I suppose it's perfectly fine if that's all they're doing. Because they're certainly not all that distinctive, some of them anyway.

Is the word *quoof* in this thing?

D-AW: It's not.

PM: That's weird.

D-AW: Isn't it?

PM: Because if you were going to put a word in, that would be the word to put in. I have wondered about that, I have to say. I've wondered about that, if anyone ever did that, but I suppose maybe there's no other evidence for it but that poem, and maybe that's just not enough.

D-AW: There are words like that, words we tend to associate with particular poets. Sometimes you find them in OED and sometimes you don't. I've always thought *etherized* should get Eliot in. But he's not there under *etherize*.<sup>4</sup>

PM: But *etherized* should be in there. That was one of the key usages of that word.

D-AW: And presumably had some kind of cultural ripple as well. Even the lexicographer who objected that his job isn't to pick out the nice lines of poems, might agree that the use has had some echo in the language.

PM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Those are two of the most significant lines—in fact the break between those two lines, used to be quoted by Allen Tate as the moment at which the twentieth century began, specifically in those two lines. One might have said that twentieth-century poetry began with John Donne, but ... I wonder if Eliot is listed under *grimpen*, which comes from Conan Doyle. I would imagine that those are the only two usages of that word probably in the English language.

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<sup>4</sup> As of the March 2014 update of *OED Online* this is no longer the case.

D-AW: He is. And Geoffrey Hill has one.

PM: Oh does he? Well then he's in conversation with the poem.

D-AW: Just to go back on that idea that dictionaries are put together by people ...

PM: Yeah, by kids in many cases. Like ourselves.

D-AW: ... dictionaries tend to anonymize those authors, and at the same time tend to claim all sorts of authority for themselves. And I wonder whether in reading the dictionaries—I suppose you've talked a little about this in the case of Irish etymologies—whether you have the sense of the human intelligence behind the thing, the hand of the lexicographer either making mistakes or not making mistakes, or whether that sort of disappears into the presentation.

PM: Well, I appeal to the OED as a source on which for the most part one may rely. Certainly in the particular edition that I use most of the time. Though I am using this *Collins Dictionary* a lot more, because a lot of the usages that I would be interested in, you're only going to get them in a quite up-to-date dictionary. I've never really been into the *OED Online*. Maybe I should. I think I might even have a link to it. But I haven't used it once. It's the physicality of the book that I like. It's a matter of pages I suppose. I like poking about through a dictionary. Having gone to look up a particular word, then I look at this other word, then I look at all these other words on the page and I think, 'my God', you know? I realize I know nothing whatsoever about the English language. Even though I know quite a bit about it, I suppose. Compared to many people I have probably quite a large vocabulary. A lot of it is obsolete and all the rest of it but ... I just enjoy playing around in there. It's one of my hobbies.

D-AW: Is it? Recreationally?

PM: Well, yeah. I mean it becomes recreational, in the sense that I might have started out looking you know working on a wee poem, but it doesn't take much to set me off on another course. And it certainly doesn't take much—and these days it takes even less—to make me think that I want to have a good time while I write poetry. Which becomes more and more difficult. But maybe now I'll start using the *OED Online* a bit more. Check it out more. Read about myself.

D-AW: Do you know that the *maggot* is probably related etymologically to *maddock*?

PM: I do. I do indeed. But then again, where does that lead us?

D-AW: That's my basic question about etymologies in poetry: where do they lead us, and where do they leave us?

PM: Well they either leave us somewhere or they leave us nowhere. And, like everything else, you have to be able to adjudicate from case to case, and say, well, you know, 'the word *maddock*, from the term *maggot*, first presented itself (or at least that would be one orthography for how it first presents itself) and happens to be quite like this other word, but ... but ...'

D-AW: But isn't.

PM: ... but that's just ... there's nothing to be gained by exploring that, I think. Joyce probably would make something of that, and you could see that it was amusing that there was a homophone there, or near homophone, could be interesting to a point. But is it really illuminating in that case? Not really.

D-AW: What about some other cases? There are moments in poems where you will bring up an etymology ...

PM: Sometimes a fake one? Is that what you were getting at earlier on?

D-AW: Well sometimes, yes, but then a lot of your poems depend on some kind of mistaken fact, or some mistake in fact, or a fact of uncertainty ...

PM: Yes, yes ...

D-AW: But for instance *chlamydia*, or *larva*—and the various other invocations of or appeals to etymology in poems, where do those leave us? Or do they leave us anywhere?

PM: I think it depends. Say *Eglis*. There's something to be gained from that musing in the poem about 'The Right Arm'.

D-AW: What do you think is to be gained?

PM: Well because despite what the OED would say, or is likely to say, if it were dealing with a proper name like Eglis, there's a strong likelihood that an older version of the OED would say 'Well, that can't possibly have anything to do with the word *ecclesia*'. Just as they would be likely to refute that there's any connection between the Irish word *espoc* and the word *episcopus*, or the Irish *sacaire*, which is the same as *sacerdos*. Those are interesting because one can divine why these connections are what they are, if only because of the influence of the Church in Ireland. So there's some revelation to be had in an understanding of the connection between words and languages.

D-AW: There's a line where etymology and translation converge, since etymologies at some point cross a threshold into another language, are as it were 'translated' into English.

PM: Yes that's right. Don't you think that most writers would tend to be interested in how words come to be used in the way that they are? I don't know if one necessarily *has* to be, to be a writer. But I think that the more one knows in general I'd say the better. One doesn't necessarily have to dwell upon it or muse upon it. One isn't dwelling upon the etymology of every word one is using. On the other hand there may be something under the surface connecting this word and that word over there, in terms of the vertical aspect of language as much as the horizontal. I'm sure that it has to do with root systems and connections that are not necessarily obvious but allow things to flourish in the natural world. Because there *are* connections that are not necessarily visible. I was up here this morning where they're working on the new Tube station. They've build a system sending cement out while they're excavating so that it underpins the other buildings around the site, which might otherwise collapse. So there's that kind of unseen connection between things, just as there's an

unseen structure that's being set up in this building up the street here, that's going to hold it up. And I think sometimes those connections may be in the language.

D-AW: Is that's what's happening in 'Plovers'?

PM: Oh yes, 'Plovers'—about the rain. Well that's a poem—poems come in all sorts of shapes and forms, and they work in different ways. And that one works, if it works at all, basically as a pun.

D-AW: But it's not a *mere* pun. It's a pun intended to be somehow revelatory of something essential about the bird.

PM: Yes. That they're 'the embodiment of rain' it says. *Plevoir*. Which it is, I think—isn't that right?

D-AW: Yes it is, but nobody knows *why* they're called *plovers*. Some say it's because they're mostly seen in rain, or they feed in the rain, a whole list of things to do with rain, but none of these things are more particularly true of plovers than of any other bird.

PM: Does anybody say they look like rain showers going by?

D-AW: I haven't read that. But that's what your poem is saying, I think.

PM: Yes, that's right. That's part of it. So you know, that's a kind of pun. I suppose it depends on how seriously one takes puns.

In the Irish context there's the tradition of *dinnseanchas*. A lot of that has to do with presenting, almost inevitably, almost universally, an almost inevitably false etymology. So, you know [*looks at the café menu*], this place's name is *prix-fixe*, and that's because the great hero Fiques was thought to be first among the warriors here, and so *pre-* aspect is the same as *primus*. So that's what *dinnseanchas* is doing: presenting this back-story as a piece of hard evidence.

D-AW: I don't know whether in the tradition they're acknowledged fictions, but there's a kind of essentialism behind that, that says that the word somehow grows out of the place.

PM: Yes there is. But also I wouldn't be surprised if there isn't an acknowledgement that this is all baloney. And there's a kind of tall tale aspect of it, and everybody knows it.

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