In a 1999 interview, Paul Muldoon said that if a poem ‘has no obvi-
ous destination, there’s a chance we’ll be setting out on an interesting
ride’, even if that endpoint is back where the poem began.¹ In ‘The
Sightseers’, for instance, Muldoon’s family venture out to see the new
roundabout at Ballygawley, ‘the first in mid-Ulster’, and listen on the
way to Uncle Pat’s story of being accosted by the B-Specials, who made
him denounce his Catholicism: ‘They held a pistol so hard against
his forehead / there was still the mark of an O when he got home.’²

The destination the sightseers have in mind remains elusive, and the
progress figured by the new roundabout circles back to the same old
restrictions; but if the poem returns to its beginning, the reader, like the
participants, is not quite the same for the journey.

Within Muldoon’s work there is a tension between linearity and cir-
cularity, where a poem’s progressive elucidation is circular. Circularity is
both a thematic and an aesthetic principle, even when it comes to the
writing of elegy, the genre that perhaps more than any other requires
the poet to get somewhere, to make emotional progress. The Annals of
Chile (1994) confirmed Muldoon as the most technically brilliant poet
of his generation, and it was here, in ‘Yarrow’ and ‘Incantata’, that he
deployed the large-scale circular structures, with repeated rhyme words,
that have reappeared in subsequent collections. Those constructions
were formed in response to the deaths from cancer of Muldoon’s mother,
and a former girlfriend, the artist Mary Farl Powers. The structural prin-
ciples of the disease – replication, invasion and metastasis – elicited
mimetic correlatives. ‘Incantata’’s 360 lines replicate from a central
stanza or cell, where the rhymes of the first cell are bound to those of
the last, the rhymes of the second are shared by the second-last, and so
on, as they assess predestination and whether art can redeem amongst
the wreckage of death. ‘Yarrow’ is a ‘great wheel’, made up of ‘twelve intercut, exploded sestinas’, whose rhymes demonstrate the variety of combinations possible with a limited number of base units; these cancerous cells combine and spread through the body of the poet’s mother, the landscape of his childhood and his memory, countering the poem’s attempt to construct a consoling memorial. Circular structures represent both control and a lack of control over death, mourning and the functioning of the elegy.

Recent critics of elegy like Sandra M. Gilbert and Jahan Ramazani have suggested that modern and contemporary elegies are characterized by the absence of traditional consolation, made up of elements like a redemptive religious faith, a beneficent conception of nature and a notion of eternity; Ramazani argues that ‘the modern elegist tends not to achieve but resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.’ Ramazani’s words are perhaps a little too assertive, suggesting as they do that the absence of consolation is always a matter of choice rather than emotional limitation, and there are many exceptions to the rule: Alfred Tennyson, for instance, took 17 years getting over the death of Arthur Hallam, if he ever did, and many contemporary elegies, such as Seamus Heaney’s sequence ‘Clearances’, follow the redemptive pattern of pastoral elegy. There is also a possibility that such traditional elements of consolation may actually pressurize, rather than seamlessly facilitate, the consoling capability of elegy, since the distressed poet is faced with such questions as how a benign faith can be reconciled with premature death, and how a belief in eternity can fail to assuage transient grief; this restriction is something we see in section liv of In Memoriam A. H. H., as the master poet is reduced to the sounds of a crying infant. Paul Muldoon’s cancer elegies are equivocal, supremely balanced between the creative and the destructive, the consoling and the desolating. To accept the consolations of the organic is to accept the insistent formal power of cancer: for instance, the circular shape of ‘Incantata’ suggests the consuming replication of the cancer cell, but its centre is also a potato mouth giving voice to a series of potato prints. In one sense, cancer is beautifully creative, but uncontrolled; Muldoon’s forms provide redress in their breathtaking control, but this brings further layers of irony. It is easy to make a longer-lasting form than the human body, but that is no