Abstract
Given its qualities of lethality and self-destruction, inheritability and theoretical immortality, it is not surprising that cancer has been used as a figure to explore aspects of personal and political conflict in recent Irish poetry. Michael Longley has presented a history of division as an inherited condition, aligning the historical with the physical in the form of shrapnel wounds turning cancerous. In the psychological legacy of war, Longley’s poetry analyses its responsibility in tending to those historical wounds, and whether commemoration can be assuaging or incendiary. If cancer is used as a figure of a volatile history, where the boundaries of one event spill over into others, then the attempt to order grief can at times only reflect that lack of control, despite the formal impulse to restrict rather than establish further connections. More recently, Paul Muldoon’s 2010 collection Maggot examines decay as a principle of creativity, and the ways in which the poet can come to terms with the terminal, how the cancerous perspective can possibly give way to remission in political terms. ‘A Hare at Aldergrove’ examines the status of Northern Ireland through the figure of ‘A hare standing up at last on his own two feet / in the blasted grass by the runway’ of Belfast International Airport, and it speculates whether an end to self-destructive grievances and expectations – which may be as difficult to eradicate as cancer – may finally be in sight. As they engage with cancer, the formal and thematic complexity of Longley and Muldoon’s poems may offer the kind of ingenuity that could be paradigmatic of a response to complex divisions.

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