A Paul Muldoon Roundtable

Horse Latitudes, Faber, £14.99, ISBN 9780571232345;
General Admission, Gallery, £10.95, ISBN 1852354100;
The End of the Poem, Faber, £25, ISBN 0571227406

Muldoon As Critic

SEAN O'BRIEN

Paul Muldoon the poet expects his readers to be on their toes; Paul Muldoon the critic has the same expectations but also provides a courteous, almost conversational presence, both in his first critical book, *To Ireland, I* (OUP, 2000) and the new collection of Oxford Lectures on Poetry, *The End of the Poem*. The courtesy extends to his practice as a reader and a critic: the effect of his enquiries into Yeats, Frost, Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Lowell, Montale and others is to make the reader feel that the subject has been intriguingly broached, not (as with quite a lot of criticism) that the matter has been exhausted (albeit honourably) without conspicuous benefit to pleasure or understanding. Yet it is never wholly clear where we have got to: a poem is encouraged to ramify in suggestiveness until Muldoon has filled his hour-long lecture with all manner of striking sidelights and possibilities. Then he takes his leave. An unsympathetic reader would claim that Muldoon rambles, but in Muldoon's book a ramble is a good way to take in the landscape. His title – *The End of the Poem* – is a pun, since in Muldoon's book poems probably don't have ends, but instead offer ways back into themselves, so off we go again, inexhaustibly.

Although Muldoon ranges widely, his method is consistent: etymology, echoes and the anagrammatical properties of words are what first fascinate him. More than once he repeats: *nomen est omen*. Muldoon's language-world has not been disenchanted, and partly as a result he can display both rigour (in his discussion of versions of Montale's 'L'Anguilla', for example) and a readiness to snap up a trifle that others might not think worth considering: if it can be found, it's there, which can make Muldoon's imaginative literalism a bit eerie.

It is also interesting that Muldoon's critical approach assumes a natural right to the best of both worlds – intensive close reading alongside

biographical interest. Indeed, he seems at times disinclined to accept that there is a border which defines the poem as a particular thing rather than an example of everything else. Things *enter* the poem. Thus the lecture on 'The Literary Life', from Ted Hughes's posthumous collection *Birthday Letters*, involves a detailed consideration of the poem's real-world source in Marianne Moore's apparent dismissal of a batch of poems sent to her by Sylvia Plath and in Moore's unsuccessful attempt to rectify matters when encountering Hughes at a party after Plath's death. Hughes writes: "I listened, heavy as a graveyard, / While she searched for the grave / Where she could lay down her little wreath", and Muldoon concludes: "'The Literary Life' is not only an extraordinarily unabashed account of a particularly strong attack of the anxiety of influence, but it's impossible to read without a sense of the biographies of the main characters, without a regard for information available only beyond the bailiwick of the poem, including [...] information about times, dates and places."

You might argue that this is to spare the poem the task of standing on its own two feet. Indeed, what Muldoon has in a sense done is to considerably increase the poem's interest by his own critical / biographical labours. There is, though, very unusually, a word in this poem that doesn't quite yield itself to Muldoon's attention. Moore's face is described as a "tiny American treen bobbin / On a spindle", and Muldoon glosses 'treen' as an archaic word meaning 'made of tree', there to indicate what is wooden and archaic in Moore's attitudes. To an English reader of Muldoon's generation, though, 'treen' also refers to the Treens. These were the army of pitiless skull-faced robots commanded by the Mekon, a dwarfish creature with a massive head, who bestrode the cosmos from a saucer-vehicle, and dominated the adventures of Dan Dare in the Eagle. Can this be admitted to the poem? The poem as Muldoon presents it is borderless, and the implication that there is something absurd, shrunken and imperiously monstrous about Moore seems to square with his interpretation, though it would of course be extremely unkind and – for all we know – inaccurate.

It is uncertain whether Muldoon will go on to decide whether there are, or should be, limits to interpretation. Writing about Lowell, an intensively autobiographical poet who seems to expect you to know the real life characters passing through his poems, Muldoon refers to the need for a poem to be "*relatively* free-standing", which keeps the options open. After all, he has made a writing life out of seeing what might be possible. Why should he set frontiers to his enquiries? One thing is sure: Muldoon's gifts extend to criticism as well as poetry. His essays strike the difficult balance between due complexity and readability. Even people who normally give

literary criticism a wide berth could find a good deal of stimulus and pleasure in *The End of the Poem*. Let's hope some of them give it a try.

Sean O'Brien's 'Blue Night' and 'The Them' appear on pp. 5–6.

Horse Latitudes

PETER MCDONALD

Is poetry a game? Or, more relevantly perhaps, what kind of a game is Paul Muldoon's poetry? Does it, for example, have rules? In 'It Is What It Is', the poet seems to be propelled (for no immediately apparent reason) from the unwrapping of a present for his young son in contemporary America to a sitting-room in 1950s Co. Antrim, and:

> the inlaid cigarette-box, the shamrock-painted jug,
> the New Testament bound in red leather
> lying open, Lordie, on her lap
> while I mull over the rules of this imperspicuous game
> that seems to be missing one piece, if not more.

Already, with the poem only half over, there are puzzles here, some of them easier to solve than others. "Imperspicuous" is one: "not perspicuous or clear; obscure" says the *OED*, warning that the word is *rare*, and giving a sole instance (from 1721). "Lordie" is another: this time, the puzzle is not so much semantic as tonal, for this interjected exclamation smacks of kitsch, as though Muldoon's voice was suddenly experiencing some kind of interference from Al Jolson, or an old American sitcom. As the poem concludes, Muldoon proffers more pieces of the puzzle:

> My mother. Shipping out for good. For good this time.
> The game. The plaything spread on the rug.
> The fifty years I've spent trying to put it together.

The poem is tight, in a certain formal sense, with carefully interlaced rhymes; but it is loose syntactically, as the failure of these last lines to produce real sentences indicates. Is, for example, "The game" the same thing

as "The plaything spread on the rug"? What, in that case, is the "it" of the last line? And what would those "fifty years" be doing if they were indeed to find themselves as the subjects in a sentence? We don't know; does Muldoon?

One response might be simple: Muldoon doesn't know these things, and that's precisely the point of the poem. However, both *Horse Latitudes* and its companion-volume of Oxford lectures, *The End of the Poem*, reveal a writer who is keen – very keen – to suggest that poetry is full of puzzles which, with the right equipment, are capable of solution. Muldoon invests very heavily in what might be called an hermetic theory of reading – which is also, as he acknowledges, a theory of writing. The finding of clues, and the apparently wayward, the counter-intuitive or sometimes plain irrational methods of piecing these together, lead Muldoon deep into intertextual mazes in, and between, his chosen poems and poets. To look for an argument in *The End of the Poem* would be to look for the wrong thing, for Muldoon is engaged rather on a complicated series of displays, both of his learning and of himself as a reader and writer. Repeatedly, Muldoon explores a poem to show that everything connects (in ways always more or less arcane) with everything else, and that nothing is too odd, or too unlikely, to be good material for such connections. It all adds up, Muldoon suggests; but he refrains from saying what it all adds up to.

Horse Latitudes seems to live by the same rules as its critical companion and, because Muldoon has been for so long so very eye-catching a poet, one whose style of writing has been both intoxicating and infectious, it's possible to go with the flow of these poems, enjoying them for their Muldoon-like qualities without pausing to wonder too much about the particular games that are being played. And perhaps settling for the "imperspicuous" here is enough. Certainly, there are poems that can stand alone as powerful – I would instance 'Turkey Buzzards' above all, along with 'Tithonus', 'Eggs' and 'The Landing'. But even an enthusiastic reader of Muldoon must be pulled up short by some of the material, where the very scale of the intellectual machinery, and its great, hermetically labouring noise, are close to overwhelming. There are some errors in scale – 'The Old Country' is far too long, for example, as are the '90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore'. In both cases, the problem is one that has bedevilled Muldoon for a long time: an excess of formalism meeting an excess of clue-dropping. The 'Horse Latitudes' sequence itself strains under the burden of wanting to say something about the woeful politics of the world and not finding a direct language adequate to its purposes. 'Sillyhow Stride', in which Muldoon mixes private grief (for his sister) with celebrity grief (for Warren Zevon) seems to me (though I would admit to not being necessarily perspicacious) an empty

performance, one shot down completely by the over-generous injections of lines written by John Donne. Insofar as the poetry communicates (and this is so for the book as a whole), it conveys an awareness of death: there is certainly a chill to be felt, but Muldoon seems to have little to tell us about that which we don't know already. Perhaps, as with much successful contemporary poetry, it is precisely the banality of the meaning which appeals, and which enables the obscurity, the endlessly-proliferating formal self-involvement, and the unconstrained instability of the diction to pass muster. At this stage in his career (though not, I think, at some earlier stages), a Muldoon poem has little new to say: instead, and with a certain bristling defensiveness, it is what it is. By Muldoon's own best standards, this isn't really enough.

Peter McDonald's latest collection is *The House of Clay* (Carcanet, 2007).

Muldoon's New Poems And Lyrics

STEVEN MATTHEWS

To start in with the titles: *Horse Latitudes*, Paul Muldoon's eleventh collection from Faber, is glossed in the book's blurb as the navigational zone north and south of the equator "in which stasis if not stagnation is the order of the day"; the area where sailors once threw horses into the ocean to conserve supplies. By contrast, *General Admission* denotes Muldoon's gathering of lyrics written for his equivocally-named rock band 'Rackett' (the rear-jacket photo of whom unequivocally brings to mind Muldoon's own earlier poem – hey – 'Paunch'). 'General Admission' is interestingly slippery, its seemingly genial acceptingness carrying resonant charge from a confessional 'admission of' something, as well as Shakespearean possibility in 'the general', the public, who are somehow being allowed to engage with these lyrics. The two titles knock against each other. On the one hand, the more contained, but self-proclaimedly in-the-doldrums, collection from the main poetry publisher, swathed in its George Stubbs cover picture. On the other, the cartoonic Gallery cover suggesting that the besuited poet can really (for good or ill, and without condescension) let it hang loose.

The rock lyrics let in 'the general' in a surprising way also; often being voiced by stereotypical low- or no-lifes, intriguingly cast as urbane corporate-climbers, social creepers and PhD students on the make (in every sense). Street names, the names of pavement cafés, of beauty products and gizmos, leap off every page, and jostle wittily alongside relics of high culture and history:

> To think you used to scold [...]
> My saying Paris Hilton
> And Haile Selassie
> And Carrière's *Milton*
> And your own sweet chassis
> Were cast in the same mold

The typical zest with which the syntax of this stanza skips around the alarming rhymes towards its inevitable destination (Selassie/chassis) reminds us, as if we needed it, that, for all of his supposedly appealing 'post-modern' openness, Muldoon's master remains, as always (and for ill *and* good), the old *seigneur* Byron. The question, then, becomes one as to how far we should indulge the indulgence of this mid-career Muldoon, replete with the old vim, but seemingly unable to find something different to say (if able self-consciously to advertise the fact)? Like later Byron, the worry is that he has become glutted on the success of his own knack ("You think I'm Mr Right," as one opening lyric line has it), and that he's now gone 'Wrong'. Form remains while the content, the ability to carry the poetic quest forward, has possibly leached away. The 'general admission' is one of knowing cosiness, sounding off to no end.

Such knowledge also weighs upon Muldoon's new collection of poetry, signal again in its deployment of formal ambition, but troublingly inert in terms of its content. As the third part of this recent outpouring, *The End of the Poem*, seems to suggest – for all the lectures' glancing across etymologies and aural consonances of poetry in search of a key to unlock it – poets are inveterate self-rewriters. They carry with them a stock of imagery, modes, and possible formal choices from work to work, which then amount to their signature. The becalmed *Horse Latitudes* wears and performs this knowledge as one of its surface traits. Muldoon's 1998 *Hay* had seen him buoyantly 'mid-career', seemingly waiting for "something to take flight". Yet, as Clair Wills was the first to point out about *Hay*, both the opening sequence and its closing sonnets redeployed the same ninety rhyme sounds from 'Incantata' (Muldoon's great, sonorous elegy for the artist Mary Farl Powers) and

'Yarrow' (partly about the death of his mother) from his previous collection. Those same ninety rhymes have since appeared in the final sequence of the intermediary collection between *Hay* and *Horse Latitudes*, 'At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999' from *Moy Sand and Gravel*. They now recur *once again* in the final elegy from the new collection, 'Sillyhow Stride', for the record producer Warren Zevon. Rarely if ever in the history of poetry has this complex formal self-restraint and repetition been played out across such expanses of poetry. The doldrums indicated by the title of the new collection are a sign of repeatedly played out ending, of death writ o'er all.

Horse Latitudes 'book ends' *Hay* in other formal senses: through its sequence of ninety rhymed haikus, its sonnet sequence (here a rather obvious juxtaposition of battles ancient and modern with a love affair) and other 'exploded' sonnet forms. In genre terms here again is a riddle (its answer a disappointing 'griddle'), and a re-skewing of the joyously skewed everyday sayings or *saws* from the earlier collection's 'Symposium' ("To have your cake is to pay Paul"). Now, in 'The Old Country', we have, significantly, thirteen sonnets on the same idea (Muldoon is as much a numerologist as Yeats or Dante). This is an old country where nothing changes, since "Every track was an inside track / and every job an inside job."

Where *Hay* had derived much poetic possibility from its delight in the 'what ifs' of life, and *Moy Sand and Gravel* from the exploration of ancestral pasts, both those familiar, and those with which Muldoon ("the goy from the Moy") had become entwined through marriage, it is difficult to discover what the stringencies of *Horse Latitudes* cohere around, beyond what have now become signature 'Muldoon' themes. Another sonnet here, 'Glaucus', reprises 'Yarrow' in its knowledge that the preservation of the purest possibility, "out of the fray", can lead the artist to self-destruction. Glaucus is "eaten now by his own mares", formerly kept from common "horse toils."

While the reminder that the quotidian securities and order of individual worlds are vulnerable to threatening forces from beyond, and finally to death, is *personally* unbearable, to be repeatedly reminded of it *poetically* is to become aware that something more needs to be said. Repeated aural return to this primal scene, at whatever extension and with whatever numerological inventiveness, overwhelms and stalls the poetic career. The druggy zaniness of 'Sillyhow Stride' is a weak resonance of life-asserting residues in 'Incantata', and in turn threatens to subsume the more truly realised feeling in the elegy, embedded within this to Zevon, for Muldoon's sister. Unless Muldoon finds a way beyond current stasis, his poetry will become increasingly bloated by more of the same, and more of the same again.

Steven Matthews's latest book is *Modernism*, in the Arnold Context Series.