

A Conversation with Paul Muldoon

At 33, Belfast's Paul Muldoon has established a reputation as one of Ireland's most influential new poets. His first pamphlet, Knowing my Place, appeared in 1971. In 1972 he received the Eric Gregory Award for poetry. He has published four collections with Faber and Wake Forest University Press: New Weather (1973), Mules (1977), Why Brownlee Left (1980), and Quooof (1983). He has also recorded a Faber Poetry Cassette with Ted Hughes.

Of his first collection, Seamus Heaney has said, "It introduced us to a distinctive sensibility, a supple inward music, a poetry that insisted on its proper life as words before it conceded the claims of that other life we all live before and after words."

In February of 1984, Muldoon was a featured reader in the Chicago Review Speaker Series. Before the reading he was kind enough to answer some of my questions about his work.

Michael Donaghy: Lets talk about your association with other contemporary Irish poets. I have a sense that there are two stages in the recent "renaissance". The first stage, where Heaney, Mahon, and Longley broke ground and got the attention of British and American publishers, and then there's you, Ciaran Carson, and the others. But I don't know how much support the first generation gave your group.

Paul Muldoon: A lot of support. When I was at secondary school, I became aware of poets like Eliot and of the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*. And I became aware (partly through teachers at this school and partly because they were receiving a fair amount of attention) of the

new poets in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley, and I read their books as they came out. I met Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley in 1968, when they were on a tour of the province and I sent some poems to Heaney who was guest-editing an issue of *Thresholds*, and he published a few of my poems there. I found Heaney and Longley very generous and welcoming.

MD: How old were you then?

PM: I was seventeen or eighteen at the time and going up to Queens University in Belfast shortly after that, and Heaney was my tutor there. I felt he was much older and wiser, but at the same time very supportive and generous. There was also the fag end of a movement which had just about petered out—the critical group to which Heaney and Longley (I don't think Mahon) and various other writers belonged—which was run by a man named Phillip Hobsbawm.

MD: This was the group that published in *Phoenix*?

PM: Yeah. A lot of them published in *Phoenix*. Harry Chambers, who edited *Phoenix*, was also in Belfast for some time. So for them and for a lot of the younger poets there was a sense of an audience not only in Ireland but in England—and that seemed to give, in a provincial way, some kind of credibility to what was happening. Now people may dispute this, but the fact is our sense of the London scene was very important, because then—perhaps less so now—London was seen as the cultural center of those islands. Dublin had already declined, and Kavanagh had just died, so that particular Irish literary scene had to some extent disappeared. There were a lot of people in Belfast writing with this sense of a London audience. They came together to form “The Group” to meet and discuss each other's work. They were meeting in Seamus Heaney's house for a couple of years, and then Seamus went to Berkeley. Another year it met in a pub, another year in Seamus's house, and it sort of petered out after that. There was never any sense of a movement with a manifesto or anything as pronounced as that, and I think if you read these people, it's evident that they're doing very different things.

MD: You're certainly pursuing a style different from Heaney's. With Heaney you have a sense that he's writing out of a myth—it sounds like the roots of the world are speaking through him—whereas with you and Derek Mahon there's a more ironic, formal sensibility.

PM: Well I'm probably the worst person to answer that. It's a very small place, only fifty or sixty miles across, perhaps, and the same

north-south. You tend to be brought up in much the same kind of way and have the same kind of experience. My experience was very much like Heaney's—brought up in the country, going to the same university, and pretty much following the same kind of tack—though he's fifteen years older (and I think those are a significant fifteen years.) It's true that a lot of things I write about are similar to things Seamus Heaney writes about, and early on I found comparisons a bit galling. There's a great tendency among commentators to compare everyone in this group to Heaney, and they say things like, "Writers in the north of Ireland are writing in the shadow of Seamus Heaney." Perhaps it's more accurate to say that readers are reading in his shadow. But in terms of what you were saying about Mahon, the most obvious thing is that both Derek and myself and indeed Michael Longley write in more evidently traditional forms, which Seamus Heaney doesn't, at least not so obviously. On a casual glance that would tend to suggest similarities or closer relationships. As I see it, these people are raising very different concerns.

MD: Do you read Irish? I wondered to what extent you've trained your ear on Gaelic verse and to what extent the assonance and internal rhyme in your work derives from a tradition of Irish poetry in English.

PM: That's a total imponderable, it seems to me. I'm not aware of assonance as I'm writing it. You know, "Let's have a bit of assonance here." I don't think anybody does. It's very difficult for any writer to describe his or her own style. I think there would be something seriously wrong if they could mathematically describe their style. The Irish thing . . . I don't know. I've read a lot of poetry in Gaelic, but I'm not aware of any carry over from that. If you think of the people who did consciously try to carry over Gaelic form and rhythms, like Thomas Moore in his songs, or Mangan and Davis, it all looks very stilted, not quite appropriate to English. English has its own prosody, and I think it's dangerous to assert that somehow English as it's spoken in Ireland is more colorful or musical. Those are unreal terms, and I don't understand them. I would say that in some respects the English language is still being learned in Ireland, but I wouldn't become overly romantic about it.

MD: Hugh Kenner in *The Colder Eye* makes an interesting case for an analysis of Irish literary style based on the word order of the Irish-English sentence.

PM: Yes, well I suppose someone like Synge would be a prime example of that. He took the structure of Gaelic sentences and transcribed

them. No, I find Synge very hard to stick. I find that kind of language forced. In *The Shadow Of The Glen*, for example, the tramp arriving at the door; I can't quote the line exactly . . . It's just stilted and stultifying, because he's not engaging by and large the rhythms of everyday speech.

MD: There must have been a precedent in English poetry. Where could that rhapsodic rhythm and fanciful sentence structure have come from? Hopkins maybe?

PM: I don't think so. Hopkins didn't hit the scene until 1912. Maybe Mangan or Moore. There would have been some kind of germ of traditional gaelic poetry in English.

MD: In characterizing your work a lot of reviewers refer to your "wry tone".

PM: Well I'm not aware of a particular tone or style when I'm writing. That seems to me to be a form of death.

MD: But there's a time to be self-conscious.

PM: Well, certainly one should be *conscious*, but not to the point where you're looking over your shoulder saying "This is P. Muldoon sitting down to write a poem." I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in getting on with the poem.

MD: That's true, but when I read "Immram" the tone really keeps me on my toes from line to line.

PM: Well, that was the hope. Naturally, that isn't my language; it's so far removed from my rhythms of speech. . . . As you know, it's totally parodic of [Raymond] Chandler.

MD: But you undermine and transform the Chandler, and you find Byron in there too, and Robert Service as well.

PM: There were various reasons for that. Byron is one of the classic tellers of tales. He just grabs you and takes you with him . . . so I was hoping for a bit of that. And Chandler appeals as a supreme stylist – perhaps a *mere* stylist. That's not to denigrate him. That upgrades him in my book.

MD: A pure stylist?

PM: Yes. A man who pretended to be engaged in narratives but wasn't the least interested.

MD: You know, Auden was a great fan of Chandler's for the same reason.

PM: Sure. Chandler said that when he was stuck, he'd have another body fall out of the cupboard. If you examine any of his plots you find that they're incredibly shaky. And yet it doesn't matter.

MD: You say you admire Byron because he's a great storyteller. But there's another aspect of Byron present in your longer poems—the extraordinary rhymes of *Don Juan* . . . you have some great rhymes in “Immram” . . .

PM: . . . really terrible rhymes . . .

MD: Now I was hoping you'd say you were following in the Irish tradition of slant rhyme handed down through Yeats.

PM: Indeed there may be something in that, that kind of assonantal rhyme. That's ancient history. There's nothing new about that, but I am interested in half rhymes or less than half rhymes.

MD: You do some wonderful things with rhyme, and you foreground some of the most tenuous aural connections.

PM: Well, any kind of formalism is most useful as a kind of framework for both the reader and the writer and the reader/writer as he's trying to put the thing down. It's like a piece of scaffolding or a loom. At the end of the day you can take the loom away, and you're not conscious of the structure—the thing doesn't leap out at you and assert itself. But there's got to be some logic to these things. There's no point in using rhyme for its own sake; the framework has to be so far back it doesn't distract the reader from the thrust of the poem. Or, as in Byron, it should grab you by the back of the head and say, ‘Look at this. This is absolutely silly.’

MD: So it should either be subliminal or . . .

PM: Well I'm not being proscriptive about these things. Lots of fun can be had rhyming “moon” with “June”. But again, there's got to be some reason for these things.

MD: You do a lot of interesting things with narrative form, subverting narrative convention, just as you often undermine traditional forms—the crumbled sonnet, for example.

PM: That’s a good word. Someone has described them as “deconstructed sonnets.” Yeah, there’s a lot of that.

MD: Well I find that same deconstructing at work in the longer poems. “Immram” and “The More A Man Has The More A Man Wants” are very compelling as stories. You’re swept up with the action
. . .

PM: They get you to turn the page.

MD: And they keep you in suspense from line to line. I’m always wondering how you’re going to complete or default on a rhyme or how you’re going to turn this or that cliché on its head. But the most interesting thing I find is where you’ll flash from the main story to some detail (the narrator’s father in “Immram,” for example, and the description of his life in South America). The stories have these narrative *cul-de-sacs*, and this again reminds me of Byron.

PM: Yes. I suppose another way of describing it would be “cinematic” or “quick cutting.” In a longer poem you simply cannot go at a lick right the way through. You’ve got to have variety in the pace or else it’s a runaway horse. Or it’s boring. And one way to vary the pace is to move in for a close up of a detail and quick cut back to the central story. But I don’t think there’s anything earth-shattering in my use of that technique. It’s just nuts and bolts stuff.

MD: Often in your books a theme develops through individual poems. Some peculiar word or reference will be picked up in the next poem. The title poem of your new book *Quoof*, for example, ends with your hand on this girl’s breast like the “Spoor of the yeti,” and the next poem is “Bigfoot.” They seem to lead on that way so often. Are you aware of these themes at the very beginning or do you try to arrange the poems this way at the end?

PM: Well, this is a big one. I think because these poems—anyone’s poems—come from one personality it’s inevitable that the range of concerns will be kind of coherent. I certainly don’t sit down to write books with themes—that’d be an appalling thought—but I think there’s some reason why a book is a book, not just because it’s forty pages or sixty, or because it has three dozen poems in it. I mean there’s

got to be some other shape or rationale. As the individual poems come along, they begin, for me at any rate, to sit beside each other comfortably or uncomfortably, to move around, sometimes correcting each other or illuminating each other (one hopes), or perhaps one will completely deny the thrust of another. When a number of poems are gathered together in their individual names, then perhaps they have some common purpose—but I don't want to give you the idea that there's something programmatic or calculating about this procedure. Think of Yeats, for example, as he grew older he revised and changed words in his earlier work so there'd seem to be a kind of continuity of theme and concern—as if to prove that Yeats was a guy who really knew what he was up to from the start.

MD: Derek Mahon revised a lot for his last comprehensive collection. Some people think he damaged the poems. Of course, all that's very hard to say. It requires a freshly distanced reading, you get so used to the original versions.

PM: Well that certainly is a problem for me, but I wouldn't want to go so far as to say they're damaged. In general, my feeling is that a writer has no particular right to go back to something he's written or that has been written through him—with whom he's had some kind of affair. It may be an affair of a weekend or one that lasts six months, say five years later things have changed—I don't think a writer has any right to go back and fiddle about with it. If he feels the thing doesn't work, then skip it, throw it out, try to forget about it. I'm sure there are all sorts of marvellous exceptions to this principle, but I would prefer to lose the entire limb rather than try and doctor it. When you're writing a poem, you might be particularly alert to the significance or impulse of a particular word or how it relates to another word, and later you may have entirely forgotten about this. I know that at times people have mentioned something they saw in one of my poems, and I'd forgotten that that was going on there myself. There's always that danger.

MD: Also, a poem is conceived in a unified impulse—whether it takes a week or month—and after you've moved along and gone on to something else you can never be entirely faithful to that. Another thing is that it no longer belongs to you.

PM: Exactly. You may perhaps be slightly better informed, you may have a special relationship with it, but its no more than that. It belongs to other people. You're only another reader after a certain point, and at that point you're free to say, "Well, as a reader of this poem I think

it's not that bad." Or more often, I must say that it's a pretty terrible poem.

MD: Does the expression "Martian poetry" mean anything to you?

PM: Yes. Five or six years ago in England, Craig Raine published a book called *A Martian Sends A Postcard Home* which presents an innocent or naive view of everyday objects. It was very effective; his images . . . "similes" is the key word . . . can be very rewarding, and there are a few other poets in England who have been classed along with him in this kind of "pack"—David Sweetman and Christopher Reid, for example. It's a style that attracts a lot of attention and is very fashionable, but I get a bit concerned at the short sightedness of some commentators on these matters who would suggest that the simile is something that was invented over the past five or six years. It's a bit silly to say of a writer who uses simile—which is after all one of the key tools of any kind of writing—that "This is Martian". It has been said, and I think that's quite extraordinary.

MD: Do you feel you've been tagged as one of these poets?

PM: Once or twice, yes. I don't like being labelled and reviewers are all about labels. Anyone who says of a particular writer, "This guy is a Martian," because he uses similes, is a fool. There's also this new idea that's being pushed at the moment of a "new narrative" movement in English poetry. From what I remember of the introduction to the new Penguin anthology of contemporary British poetry, it argues that there are these two strains or trends, the Martian and the narrative. Some people would say that I'm a narrative poet, which I am, or that I use similes, which I do. But both narrative and the use of simile are at the heart of poetry. It's extremely short-sighted of anyone to abstract one or both of these elements. There are many other elements in the writing of poetry, and to raise any into some kind of religion . . . it's just *crap*. Certainly, I've been very interested in narrative, but I don't see myself doing anything new in that.

MD: I wanted to ask you about the differences you see between contemporary Irish/English poetry and American poetry. America is a recurrent theme in your work—the presence of the US as a political power and as an exotic place where strange things happen. And you play against the Western and Private Eye genres, two clichés of American popular literature.

PM: Yes, well clichés are clichés for very good reasons. There's a hell of a lot in them. I think that writers in Ireland, as well as the Irish in

general, are inclined to look towards America. Indeed, many have done more than look towards it.

MD: You mean they emigrate.

PM: Yes. And in terms of writing it seems to me that a lot of exciting things have happened here—perhaps most of all in the last thirty years. One of my favorite poets is Robert Frost.

MD: You've mentioned Frost in other interviews, and so has Seamus Heaney. In a way it seems to suggest that you two see more going on in Frost than a lot of Americans do.

PM: Well, I think Frost is partly to blame for that.

MD: He became an establishment poet. At Kennedy's Inaugural . . .

PM: Ah yes, but that's a very interesting matter. When I talk about this, I must say that I'm to some extent reflecting the ideas of my friend Gerard Quinn. I recently wrote a poem called "Gold" which refers to Kennedy's Inaugural. It's about reading Robert Frost with this man Quinn. Frost says that the new administration welcomes in a "golden age of poetry and power/ Of which this noontide's the beginning hour." Now noon is the peak of the day. If the beginning is the peak of it, the rest is a kind of decline. Then consider the phrase "golden age". The word "gold" as it occurs throughout Frost is almost inevitably pejorative. "Nothing gold can stay", for example, or "We almost ate our peck of gold." So old Frost was up to his tricks at Kennedy's Inauguration. That kind of complexity beyond the cracker barrel image is something we are going to have to come to terms with in Frost, if he's to be properly understood. His great virtue is that he's accessible, but sometimes, if you look twice, there's a complete undercutting of what he seems to be saying. I find that very interesting, and it's something I try to do myself. I try for a sub-text which is quite often totally at variance with the main text. If you take "Why Brownlee Left", for example, it seems to be stating in a very matter of fact way that it's a mystery why Brownlee left. But it's evident from the poem that there's a very good reason why he left: he was bored. His very name suggests this. He's a brown lee, a ploughed field. His life was programmed, and he needed to break free from becoming his own destiny. It's obvious, but the tone of the poem is at variance with that.

MD: There seems to be much more violence in *Quoof* than the other books.

PM: Yes. I don't think it's a very likeable or attractive book in its themes.

MD: It deals with very horrifying things in a grotesquely funny way. People expect a very earnest treatment of the "Troubles", but I suppose when you live with it day by day you've got to make jokes about it.

PM: You've got to. But I don't mean that it can be dismissed or treated lightly.

MD: What are your politics?

PM: I don't think it matters. I don't think it's of any interest.

MD: That's a pretty blunt statement.

PM: It doesn't matter where I stand politically, with a small "p" in terms of Irish politics. My opinion about what should happen in Northern Ireland is no more valuable than yours.