

# London Review of Books

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## Someone Else

### Adam Phillips

- *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* by [Paul Muldoon](#)  
Faber, 406 pp, £25.00, October 2006, ISBN 0 571 22740 6
- *Horse Latitudes* by [Paul Muldoon](#)  
Faber, 107 pp, £14.99, October 2006, ISBN 0 571 23234 5

Paul Muldoon excluded himself from *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, his 1986 Faber anthology, but he included a poem by Seamus Heaney that was dedicated to him. We don't of course know why the poem was dedicated to him, or indeed whether it is in any sense about him. It is a suggestive poem about what the living can get from the dead:

Widgeon  
*For Paul Muldoon*

It had been badly shot.  
While he was plucking it  
he found, he says, the voice box ó

like a flute stop  
in the broken windpipe ó

and blew upon it  
unexpectedly  
his own small widgeon cries.

Muldoon has said often enough in interviews that he likes 'ventriloquising' in his poetry, likes being able to do himself in different voices; but I take this poem to be, among other things, a warning and a question to Muldoon from the poet who was once his teacher, and about whom, at least on paper, Muldoon has the most genial and admiring of mixed feelings.

Where Heaney more often than not has been on the side of the reconciled and the intelligible, though not on the side of the angels, Muldoon has tended towards the enigmas of departure and the virtues of never arriving. Muldoon's poetry has thrived on

accidents of attention and intention, always preferring the gratuitous destinations that words set off by association, or that he is pushed towards by the arbitrariness of intricate rhyme schemes. His poetry is full of messages and morals, but they are always deferred or inferred or ironised; Heaney is not smitten by irony or obliqueness or modern literary theory (another way of saying this is that Muldoon's misgivings about what he calls in these lectures Lowell's "cultural imperialism" are more telling than Heaney's profuse admirations). In "Widgeon" though, Heaney is on Muldoon's case, warning him of the violence done to the poetry by imitators and fans – including oneself. But, perhaps more important, Heaney's question to Muldoon is about the cost of giving up on the idea of the real thing, of preferring the gratuitous discovery to the passionate quest ("he clearly hadn't shot the bird for its voice box). A widgeon is a duck, and its call, which travels a long way, is more of a whistle than a cry, at least when it speaks in its own voice. It won't have escaped either Heaney or Muldoon that *widgeon*, in the 18th century, also meant "a fool, a ninny, a simpleton" (*OED*). Weak imitations have something deathly about them, something pleading. What is at issue is authenticity, and what we happen to get from what we seem to want. The voice box is not the voice, but there is no voice without it; the dead leave us the voice boxes that are their poems, but they may not be enough. Though Heaney's voice could not be more distinctive, he also sounds like other people. Muldoon only ever really sounds like himself.

Only ever really sounding like oneself is a very odd thing to do. Muldoon's fascinating Oxford lectures, published as *The End of the Poem*, are about poetic influence more than anything else, and they might be seen as part of Muldoon's puzzle about himself. A poet clearly influenced by many people, Muldoon is generous and expansive in his naming of names; he is the exemplary poet as fan. His poems are packed, and often fitted out, with literary allusions, and yet barely a cadence or a phrase sounds derived. He seems as a poet not self-invented, which would be too knowing, but self-conceived. Like the idea of "new weather" the title of his first extraordinary book, his poetry seems impossibly original. *The End of the Poem* attempts to show us how hard-won originality in poetry can be; and it is not incidental that Muldoon has chosen to write about poets – Yeats, Hughes, Frost, Bishop, Dickinson, Stevie Smith, Lowell, Montale, Pessoa, Marianne Moore, H.D., Tsvetaeva, Arnold, Auden, Graves, Heaney, Day-Lewis – whose idiom is peculiarly distinctive (Day-Lewis being the possible exception, but Muldoon, characteristically tricky, chooses to write about a poor poem by him called "A Failure"). The distinctive poet, in Muldoon's account, never imitates; however allusive (and elusive) he or she is – and for Muldoon the poet is someone with word-radar, someone wittingly or unwittingly tracking and trading on other writings – the poet renders the language inimitable. Poets are writers who can't be copied.

Muldoon – who is inexhaustibly himself in his poems, never leaving his readers in any doubt as to who the author is – has never wanted to connect poetic originality with authenticity, or sacred sources, or real presences. His own prolific writing – which includes ten volumes of poetry, several sets of lectures, two children's books and a

libretto ó has always trodden what he called in his Clarendon Lectures, *To Ireland, I*, the fine line between the notions of ðallusivenessö and ðelusivenessö, preferring strange connections and unexpected affinities to the usual pieties and obeisances that the old idolatries required. It was ðthe extraordinary appetite and aptitude for ðintertextualityö that interested him about the writers he admired. Like a writer trying to shake off an old faith, but fearful of finding another one unwittingly, Muldoon goes to great lengths in his poetry not to be caught, by himself or other people, believing in anything too much. His cure for the old faith ó which in his case was Catholicism ó is slippage, which involves the vagaries of word-association and eloquent forms of hesitation. As if sanctimoniousness was his greatest temptation, and getting caught in someone else's system always a risk.

So in *Madoc: a Mystery*, his most deliberately (and mischievously) experimental collection, the titles of the poems, which appear inside square brackets, are the names of strong thinkers; the poems have very little, teasingly or otherwise, to do with their titles. The poem ð[Pasteur]ö for example, reads: ðThe geldingö apishamore, meanwhile, is a languid/crimson mackinaw blanket.ö Great names let you say whatever you want. Even the brackets tell you that this is some kind of joke ó academics and scholastics are the great parodiabes for Muldoon ó but not what kind of joke. Muldoon works very hard to be genial but not to be clubbable. He wants the odd detail that, singled out, singles him out and moves him on, like the ðlength of chainö in his great poem ðSomething Elseö ðwhich made me think/ of something else, then something else againö The length of chain in the poem is, explicitly, the length of chain with which the poet Nerval hanged himself; but it is also the immeasurable length of chain of associations, of one word (and thing) leading to another. All chains lead to death, but does something else and something else again get you anywhere? It gets you to the end of a poem that can ask questions like this. Nerval, in the poem, hanged himself because ðhis hopes of Adrienne/proved false.ö Loss, and loss experienced as betrayal, have increasingly become the two intractables in Muldoon's determinedly unangry poetic world. In their different ways both *Horse Latitudes* ó which is dedicated to his sister, who died last year, and has in it another of Muldoon's great elegies, this one to Warren Zevon ó and *The End of the Poem* are about what, if anything, there is to say about ends and endings. And for Muldoon this is also a question of how buoyant one can be in the face of such things.

In an early interview with John Haffenden, Muldoon was asked: ðWhy do you think the notion of alternative lives is peculiarly fetching, philosophically attractive, to your imagination?ö He replied: ðI think it's central. One of the ways in which we are most ourselves is that we imagine ourselves to be going somewhere else.ö If the need for alternatives is central, and if one of the ways we are most ourselves is in imagining ourselves going somewhere else (not, it should be noted, imagining ourselves being someone else), then where we actually are becomes a very strange place indeed. What occupies Muldoon in many of his best poems ó some of which are in *Horse Latitudes* ó is what sets him off, what springs the narrator of the poem from where he is to somewhere

else. And the more puzzling the associations are, the more efficiently they take him somewhere else: -I suppose that when I think of bees,øhe writes in an early poem, -Bechbrethaø -I think of a row of hives/running up the side of an orchard/in Loughbrickland,/and then I think of Enoch Powell.øIf you notice the way your mind happens to work rather than getting waylaid by why it works as it does, you sacrifice old-fashioned ideas of depth and purpose ó which always go together ó for new-fashioned ideas of random, arbitrary ends. There is logic in play here: a -rowøis also a noisy argument, something Enoch Powell was good at, and -hivesøare also laryngitis, which makes it difficult to speak, something Enoch Powell was very good and bad at, but Muldoon wants to go where his thoughts lead him, and the more inexplicable the links the better. His poetics depend on not knowing how the process works, but that it works; by telling us to look no further than his faith in language, which can never let him down because he can never know what it promises, Muldoon provokes the reader into a working-out of his poems that never quite works out (since *Madoc*, critics have been less and less able to close-read his work; Heaneyø's poetry, by contrast, has never outstripped the available critical vocabularies).

So in the appropriately entitled -It Is What It Isøin *Horse Latitudes*, one of several fabulous and poignant poems in the new collection, Muldoon begins:

It is what it is, the popping underfoot of the Bubble Wrap  
 in which Asherø's new toy came,  
 popping like bladder wrack on the foreshore  
 of a country toward which Iøve been rowing  
 for fifty years

It is what it is only in the sense that what it is leads him somewhere else. Born in 1951, Muldoon has been rowing (another -rowø) since he was five, but not at this point rowing back somewhere; and even though the poem later contains memories of his mother, it works by leaving out his destination. By omitting the usual hyphen from bladder-wrack ó Muldoon is as acutely attentive to the typography of his poems as he is to the diction ó and indeed by not calling it sea-weed, some terrible violence is intimated; bubble wrap, a thing that protects, is destroyed when itø no longer needed. The new note in both *Horse Latitudes* and the previous book, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, which makes these books both excessively mannered and disturbingly poignant, is that the somewhere else his poems take him to often leaves him at a loss. And the loss has become more unmanageable, less of a curious delight. The pleasure of the puzzles that Muldoon has relied on ó he treats poetic form as a puzzle rather than a constraint ó has been replaced by a more disturbing bewilderment. -It Is What It Isøends: -The game. The plaything spread on the rug./The fifty years Iøve spent trying to put it together.øIf it really was a game, a game that, as he wryly remarks, -seems to be missing one pieceø it wouldnø have taken fifty years, and he wouldnø still be at it. And if poetry and memory are not a game, what are they? And if they are a game, what kind of game? The dazzling lectures in *The End of the Poem* ó

which must be one of the most thrilling books of literary criticism published in the last fifty years ó seek to answer and not answer both these questions at the same time.

There are times in these lectures, few and far between, and the more striking for being so, when Muldoon speaks his mind, in the old-fashioned sense; that is, tells us what he thinks in a way that suggests he knows what he thinks. In a reading of Auden's "Homage to Clio" Muldoon comes straight out with it. "I want to try here to begin to understand," he begins, trying not to sound too determined, "why Auden, and so many others in the Arnoldian tradition, feel obliged to trouble themselves with the notion of the good life or the good place and the notion of the Evil One when they know perfectly well that this is high-sounding claptrap, a substitute for the demise of organised Christianity." Muldoon knows perfectly well that Auden did not know this in his poetry. But the lectures are about how poets know things perfectly well ó the poems the words of their poems come from and refer to, the phrases that their phrases are what Muldoon calls a "near version" of, the words they tellingly omit from their work ó although the writing and reading of poems depends on not knowing, not being able to know anything perfectly well. Poets, in Muldoon's account, are astoundingly knowing, but rather in the way that divining rods or migrating birds are. They know things in spite and because of themselves. Muldoon here is doing something he is mostly unwilling to do, he is telling us what he really can't stand: claptrap, and coercive ideals ó and possibly (the phrasing is slightly ambiguous) any substitute for organised Christianity. Muldoon wants us to be astounded by poets, but not to believe in them.

The artfulness of these lectures is their way of being insistently tentative and ironically self-deprecating (i.e. not self-deprecating at all) ó "If I may be so bold" "I, in my innocent way" "It is not inappropriate, I suggest" and so on ó while being extremely forceful and almost wholly persuasive. Muldoon knows all too well that he is also writing about his own poetry, making a game of giving the game away. All writers know that when they write about other writers they will be understood to be revealing something about themselves; when Muldoon writes, apropos of Tsvetaeva's "Poem of the End" that "my own conviction is that the tangential is most likely to be on target, most likely to hit the butt" and then tells us, "I'm using the word 'butt' here in the combined senses of 'a mark for archery practice; terminal point; that towards which one's efforts are directed; an end, aim, object' (*OED*)," he puts the slapstick back into his comment by omitting the other meaning of "butt" and tells us something all too obvious about his own poetry: that it thrives by never coming to the point. When it is suggested in these lectures that poems might be about something, or have a subject, "about" and "subject" are in inverted commas to keep them at a distance. He refers to his own accounts of poems as "outlandish" and "off the wall" rightly assuming that if you believe in the tangential, this must be the kind of account you prefer (the lectures, like his poetry, are reader-friendly in the sense that they eagerly second-guess the reader's likely response, while never being coerced by it). He presents his readers or listeners with their own amused outrage, which he clearly shares and enjoys, and then shows us how much we will miss if we go on

being dismissive. It is like being seduced by someone who has the best intentions, but who wouldn't think that intention was quite the right word (*tangential*, incidentally, means both 'peripheral' and 'irrelevant').

So in a dazzling reading of several poems by Emily Dickinson, linking her cramped, incisive, home-made poems with an interest in polar exploration, Muldoon remarks to the audience: 'For those of you concerned that my suggestion that Dickinson subliminally connects 'expiation' and 'expedition' might be a shade outlandish, I would suggest that such outlandish near versions are common in her writing.' Then he goes on to make the most convincing of cases, as though to doubt the point would have been to miss it. And, as ever with Muldoon, extraordinary associations are suggested with the lightest of touches. 'Shades' are 'outlandish' and 'near versions', and he is describing something that is shaded; as a subliminal connection this is difficult to see and, once seen, hard not to see. What Muldoon, with unusual stridency, calls the 'major responsibility' of both writers and readers, 'to stay on top of the material' is shaded by the sense that the most telling connections are subliminal and tangential. 'It does seem that there's a fine enough line between the concepts of 'maker' and 'faker', Muldoon remarks, giving as many hostages to fortune as possible. But the feeling of being what Muldoon calls 'on top of the material' is going to be the very thing that makes you wonder whether you're making it or faking it. Muldoon suggests that the line may not be fine enough, and that the finest lines are made out of this fact.

For Muldoon both reading and writing involve 'speculation on what's going on, consciously or unconsciously, in the writer's mind', the reader of a poem is what he calls a 'stunt-writer' and 'the person through whom the poem was written' a 'stunt-reader', each 'determining the impact of those words and those lines'. Writing works at all only because readers and writers are so similar, 'foreshadowing' each other, both interested in 'finding likenesses between unlike things', and both attentive to links where you least expect them. So when Stevie Smith uses the word 'bride' four times in her 11-line poem 'I Remember', she is taken by Muldoon to be 'ever so faintly alluding' to Keats's 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness'. And 'the aspect of 'recollection' implicit in the phrase 'I remember' is faintly ghosted by William Wordsworth's famous phrase in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion *recollected* in tranquillity.' As Muldoon knows, this is not verifiable – indeed for him the poetic seems to be virtually defined by the logic of the unlikely, the absence of straightforward causal connections – and you don't even need to be able to make these links to read the poem (though he does imply that Stevie Smith was, consciously or unconsciously, making these connections). But once they are pointed out the poems become more rather than less interesting. Using 'faintly' twice in a 14-line commentary is itself suggestive of the mind working in different states of consciousness; and allusions, as the repetition hints, are like ghosts. And when allusions are more than faint they are quotations, which are different again. Muldoon is intrigued by what poems are wittingly or unwittingly haunted by. And in a

characteristically Muldoonian twist, he sees poems as haunted by the words they omit, as much as by the words they include.

In *Horse Latitudes* he writes a series of virtuoso haikus entitled '90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore', the fifth one manages to be politically charged – about the terrible reversals of Irish history – and also a brief formulation of Muldoon's poetics:

The Big House, you see,  
still stands, though now the *tenants*  
are the absentees.

In *The End of the Poem* the poem is also the big house inhabited by absences, by the words the poet has chosen not to use, by the allusion to other poems that are somewhere else; and by being first and foremost, as Muldoon's work increasingly suggests, an elegiac form. Muldoon's writing is now haunted by the question of who will be the next absentees, of where else – if anywhere – you can go with loss. Most of the poems discussed in *The End of the Poem* are in one way or another about death. The title of *Horse Latitudes*, as the blurb usefully tells us, refers to – an area north and south of the equator in which ships tend to be becalmed, in which stasis if not stagnation is the order of the day, and where sailors traditionally threw horses overboard to conserve food and water. There has always been a muted desperation in Muldoon's writing, something frantic turned into something ingenious, or whimsical, or formally intricate. In these two books the next move, the somewhere else of the earlier books, has begun to seem a more remote possibility. Muldoon has begun to write no-exit poems, and to think about the end of the poem in its various senses, one of which is a question about the continuing viability of poetry itself. If somewhere else loses its charm it's not obvious where you can go next.

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