

Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (eds.),
Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays

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Reviewed by Toshi Takagishi, Tokyo Metropolitan University

Criticism of Paul Muldoon's poetry has steadily accelerated of late. As a Northern Irish poet who immigrated to America in 1987, attracting a good deal of attention from both sides of the Atlantic, Muldoon has constantly published outstanding poetry collections and other writings. Winning the 1995 T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize for *The Annals of Chile* (1994), the honourable chair of Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1999, and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2003, Muldoon is now probably the most noticeable celebrity of Irish poetry scene. Yet the inherent complexity of his poetry not only baffles ordinary audience, but also makes learned academics hesitate to produce full-scale and detailed critical works, after the two pioneering and influential monographs, Tim Kendall's *Paul Muldoon* in 1996 and Clair Wills' *Reading Paul Muldoon* in 1998. Meanwhile, Muldoon proceeds unflinching ahead of his critics, bringing out thrilling collections like *Hay* (1999) and *Moy Sand and Gravel* (2002). As an attempt to catch up with the forerunning poet, this book, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, some essays of which began life at a conference on Muldoon at the University of Bristol in 1998, provides us with a number of luminous exegeses and remarkable insights on his oeuvre including *Hay*, *To Ireland*, *I*, and three opera libretti. As Peter McDonald graphically expresses in the introduction, Muldoon has become 'an academically approachable author', while he seems 'always on the verge of being understood, but never quite capable of being critically pinned down'. To capture this elusive poet, the authors of this book resourcefully give unique approaches and fresh viewpoints in their own distinctive manners. For the moment this book could be assessed as the most significant and comprehensive critical guide to Paul Muldoon. Now I will survey and examine the contents of each of the essays.

The first essay, "'Thirteen or Fourteen": Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence', written by Stephen Burt, suggests that adolescent figures and situations appearing frequently in Muldoon's poems could help us interpret his styles and concerns. As the introduction puts it, '*what* a poem can tell us is not separable from *how* it tells us what it does' for Muldoon: there might be few poets who are more conscious of the parallel between *what* and *how* than Paul Muldoon. Following this formula, Burt verifies the adolescent trait that Muldoon's *what* and *how* have in common. First, Burt shows that Muldoon likes to imagine 'failed, stalled, incomplete, or continually reenacted coming-of-age', while he refuses both 'the

mature perspectives associated with adult authority' and 'the childhood innocence other poets associate with lyric'. Burt cites examples of failed adolescent situations, failed romances or adolescent romantic and sexual uncertainties through the whole career of Muldoon from *New Weather* (1973) up to *Hay*: In 'Clonfeacle' from *New Weather*, the youthful uncertainty between 'I' and 'you' is set against the older certainties Patrick and the river embody. In 'Cuba', its young people are set against its adults with public affairs interfering with the private world of the young people. In 'Making the Move', Muldoon reproduces 'comically simple fantasies and adventures of teenaged boys', and in 'Yarrow' he recalls the coming-of-age adventures, which now seem to him to have failed. These examples are illustrative enough to prove Muldoon makes regular use of failed adolescent cases.

Then Burt argues that Muldoon's persistent interest in adolescent personae and incidents works in tandem with his 'adolescent' styles; such as his abrupt endings, elusive rhymes, and attraction to indeterminacy. We can find a conspicuous example in 'Huh', the last and single-worded line of 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants'. Burt diagnoses this abrupt finish of the long poem as the 'frustrated and frustrating' form, characteristic of failed adolescent symptoms. The disjunctive phrase like 'thirteen or fourteen' (adopted as the title of this essay), another Muldoonian standard, could also originate in adolescent indecisiveness.

Moreover Burt ascribes this adolescent parallel to Muldoon's generational factor, that is, the belatedness of his generation. Burt quotes Clair Wills' suggestion that unlike those who belong to Seamus Heaney's generation Muldoon missed the Northern civil rights movement because of his belated arrival at Queen's University in 1969. Muldoon's adolescence was therefore overshadowed by the beginning of the Troubles and perhaps fostered his feeling of political impotence. Muldoon's generation was the first to grow up with the Troubles, and also the first to grow up into a world already full of rock music, a genre undoubtedly associated with youth. The youthful attribute of Muldoon's generation is sure to affect his poetry, and as Burt argues, this is an important factor that has developed Muldoon's adolescent and unstable sense of himself apart from the fixities of an adult world in his poetry. Burt's argument on the parallel between Muldoon's adolescent situations and his adolescent styles sounds quite penetrating and persuasive.

There are other essays dealing with Muldoon's belatedness: In 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', Fran Brearton, reading Muldoon with Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, examines Muldoon's intertextual relationships with his senior poets. The list of the antecedents Brearton presents includes Robert Graves, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley. Graves seems rather an unexpected name, but Brearton finds certain affinity between the two: both 'transform etymological quests into literary interpretive strategies' in their literary criticism,

particularly in Muldoon's *To Ireland, I and Graves' The White Goddess*. Brearton adds that *The White Goddess*, as an apology for poetry and a disguised autobiography, could offer 'one interpretative model for reading Muldoon'. As Graves' preoccupation with mythological origins in *The White Goddess* merges with anxiety of influence and autobiographical concerns, so Muldoon himself has been preoccupied with the poetic and familial origins. It has been suggested by some critics since 1990s that Muldoon's father can sometimes slide in Heaney's own father or Heaney himself as poetic father-figure. Yet, unlike Heaney, Muldoon 'breaks with tradition' and at the same time 'provides within his own poetry a parody of the tradition he disrupts'. This is the gist of Muldoon's anxiety of Heaney's influence.

Then Brearton himself seems to try to rival precedent critic Neil Corcoran, whose critical book *Modern Irish Poetry* implies that Muldoon can be read only in relation to Heaney. Citing Corcoran's idea about this father-son literary relationship, Brearton twists this to the other side, that is, the mother-son literary relationship between Michael Longley and Muldoon. According to Brearton's explanation, for 13 years from 1973 (when Heaney left Belfast) to 1986, Muldoon's most immediate poetic relationship was not with Heaney but with Michael Longley. The Longleys, Michael and his critic-wife Edna Longley, served as Muldoon's literary parents in his development. However, while Edna acts as critical mother, Michael acts as if he were poetic mother-figure to Muldoon: Brearton argues that Michael Longley's influence on Muldoon worked in opposition to the rather masculine lineage, which Muldoon deliberately mocked in his presentation of Heaney. Brearton follows Michael's 'maternal' influence through Muldoon's poems, particularly on his elegiac long poem 'Yarrow', which places the mother-figure in the dominant for the first time following a shift in Muldoon's representations of his parents in 1990s.

Brearton's idea could be an inspiring addition to the familiar father-son literary relationship between Heaney and Muldoon. It, however, cannot be substituted for the Longley-Muldoon relationship. It would be misleading for us to interpret Muldoon wholly dependent on the anxiety of influence theory. Brearton himself is aware of the risk, and he alerts this is not to suggest simple substitutions like 'for Heaney read Longley'. Still I say that Brearton gives an important indication that Muldoon's 1990s' poetry changed from the father-oriented style to the mother-oriented one, probably influenced by Longley.

As for Muldoon's intertextuality with other poets, there are two illuminating essays dealing with Muldoon's connection with Robert Frost.

In 'Never Quite Showing his Hand: Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon', Rachel Buxton elucidates the influence of Robert Frost on Paul Muldoon. She emphasises that 'Frost's impact on Muldoon has been no less considerable than it has been on Heaney'. She superbly demonstrates how Muldoon takes Frost as his model in his

poetry, by her in-depth analyses of two poems, 'Gold' and 'Come into My Parlour'. Her interpretation of 'Gold' is this: In 'Gold' (from *Meeting the British*) Muldoon introduces two quotations from Frost's work: 'A golden age / of poetry and power', taken from 'For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration' (which was not recited at the ceremony, though Frost wrote it for it), and 'Nothing Gold Can Stay'. Detecting Frost's evasive implications of 'decline', 'mutability', and 'death' there, Muldoon insinuates them in the poem, associating 'gold' with the declines and deaths of characters such as Frost, Kennedy, Soutine and Marilyn Monroe. Moreover he dedicates this poem to his college teacher Gerard Quinn, under whose influence he began reading Frost, and conceals his personal episodes and conversations with Quinn in this poem. Buxton shows how ingeniously Muldoon interweaves such quotations, characters, episodes and wordplays (such as *soutane* and Soutine, Merlin and Marilyn) associated with the key feature 'gold'.

Then Buxton analyses Muldoon's rewriting process of 'Come into My Parlour'. This poem, finally published in the collection *Why Brownlee Left*, had been worked on over several years. She points out Muldoon deleted Frostian postures and turns of phrases which had been evident in the earliest draft, so that the final poem cannot be facilely recognised as a Frostian poem. This revising process proves Muldoon's self-consciousness regarding Frost's influence. Buxton argues Muldoon has long been attracted to 'the combination of surface simplicity and inner complexity that he apprehends in Frost'. And she continues 'although he seldom achieves a comparably accessible surface in his own work, he does duplicate Frost's ambiguities and hidden depths.' Muldoon has tried to practice this strategy in his own poetry, and Buxton, well excavating these mischievous, 'cryptic' processes in 'Come into My Parlour', concludes that this mischievousness and complexity which Muldoon took over from Frost would demand a degree of effort on the reader.

The other essay on Frostian connection is John Redmond's 'Muldoon and Pragmatism'. This treats the issue of in what manner Muldoon wants the reader to read his poetry. According to Redmond, Muldoon, following Frost, complicates the reading process: while he makes it possible for the reader to read his poems quickly, he hints a slower reading might be preferable or a combination of slow and quick readings might be the most desirable. This process, Redmond argues, is inspired by the influence of American Pragmatism, particularly the influence on Frost of William James and of Frost on Muldoon. This sounds extravagant at first, but Redmond explains Muldoon tries to avoid ready-made solutions for existential problems or a rigidly academic approach to knowledge, and he constantly brings us back to the activity of invention, which is influenced by American pragmatism, with Emerson as its father figure, of refusing its quest for certainty and its search for foundations. As famous pragmatist William James recognises the importance

of vagueness, both Frost and Muldoon favour 'vague conjecturals', with which their verses are abounding. And Muldoon's characteristic indecisive manner, like A or B, which we can find again and again in his verse is, as Redmond indicates, a 'feature of the pragmatist heritage'.

Meanwhile, we have an essay which examines Muldoon's idea of interpretation on his own works. In "'All That': Muldoon and the Vanity of Interpretation', John Lyon begins with a number of possible interpretations on Muldoon's sonnet 'A Trifle' from the collection *Quoof*. Demonstrating some of those interpretations contradict with one another, Lyon wonders if Muldoon's poems might even be said to resist all interpretations. There might be no definite answer to this suspicion, but Lyon conjectures by an appropriate illustration how Muldoon considers the meanings of his poetry. Lyon introduces the idea of 'semantic saturation', which could be fulfilled when an author succeeds in saturating their work in 'semantic' fullness and controlling all the meanings. Lyon supposes that T. S. Eliot was perhaps interested in such an ideal condition, quoting from Eliot's essay on Lancelot Andrews, 'Andrews takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess'. (p. 115) Lyon associates this Andrews' semantics with Geoffrey Hill's, and then he asserts that 'Hill proves to be Muldoon's antithesis'. Then Lyon rightly reasons that Muldoon mocks this idea of a full juice of meaning, finding Muldoon's allusion to Andrews in the poem 'The Frog', where he presents the metaphor of squeezing 'a moral for our times' out of a frog. Lyon's conclusion would be that 'Muldoon replaces semantic control with a formal control'; a striking example of this is his grand design of making the long poems in *Hay* rhyme with the ones in *The Annals of Chile*, affording the critics more opportunities for discovering semantic and formal connections.

That's right. A formal control by rhyming is probably among the top priorities for Muldoon. We should recognise his rhyme scheme as the staple of Muldoon's creative process. In 'Pax Hibernica / Pax Americana: Rhyme and Reconciliation in Muldoon', Michael Allen examines Muldoon's rhyming strategies through the transition of his whole poetic career by scrupulously analysing each example of his versatile rhymes. Allen quotes Muldoon's euphoric statement 'I believe in the serendipity of all that, of giving oneself over to that', and defines Muldoon's basic stance on rhyming as his 'surrender to the energies inherent in rhyme'. Then Allen investigates how Muldoon ingeniously arranges various types of rhymes, particularly the combination of forward-pushing full rhymes and subversive half rhymes, in a number of his poems, to turn his narrative into a complex discourse with dramatic undertones. The key term Allen repeatedly uses in this essay is '*Künstlerroman*': he argues that with 'the eruption of rhyme into story' Muldoon's

verse grows into a fragmented *Künstlerroman* like *Sons and Lovers*, in the way it explores the sexual and Oedipal drives of the maturing artist. Thus Allen chooses to present several poems in which rhyming reveals Muldoon's sexual implications. I cannot agree with all the explications Allen shows us on Muldoon's rhyming effects, but he gives us quite a lot of relevant examples and his essay could encourage us to recognise that Muldoon really elaborates his verse using bravura rhyming technique.

'Paul Muldoon's *Transits: Muddling Through* after *Madoc*', written by John Kerrigan, is another essay which refers to the trait of Muldoon's rhyme. This essay begins with Muldoon's denial in his verse journal, *The Prince of the Quotidian*, to Seamus Deane's statement that Muldoon is in exile in Princeton. Kerrigan speculates on why Muldoon is 'so tetchy'; he might primarily object to Deane's republicanism, 'which would see the Irish diaspora as the result of British imperialism', but his petulant denial would attribute to 'larger issues of importance to contemporary poetry'. Unlike other Northern Irish poet exiles such as John Montague and Derek Mahon, Muldoon's Irish childhood was so Americanised through popular culture that he saw in Princeton a chance to explore American topics more fully and easily. Moreover Kerrigan insists that Muldoon was always 'interested in traveling around rather than one-way emigration, in transits rather than arrivals', and that Muldoon himself argues in *To Ireland, I* that the Irish are in exile in Ireland itself. In fact Muldoon brought his attraction to transits, borders or 'liminality', which also could be obviously recognised in *To Ireland, I*, to America. There he surely widened his thematic and stylistic range: he started writing opera libretti featuring real or metaphoric 'borders'. Meanwhile, particularly after *Madoc*, he promoted rhyming to an even more radical position in his poetry, based on the idea that rhyme is 'a border language' or rhymes make 'zones of muddle'. Thus Kerrigan analyses Muldoon's muddling by his experimental and persistent use of rhymes and errata in his later poetry after his immigration to America. The logic of Kerrigan's argument is distinct and persuasive.

I think I could judge David Wheatley's 'All Art is a Collaboration: Muldoon as Librettist' as the most helpful and hoped-for essay, because this is perhaps the first time that Muldoon's opera libretti have ever been exclusively and ardently treated in a critical essay. Wheatley starts this essay with general ideas on the difficulty of collaboration, the difference between the libretti and the poetry, and then comments on Muldoon's interest in Opera and his challenge as a librettist. Confessing skepticism about Opera and showing reluctance of it as an elitist art form, Muldoon explained in his interview the attraction of Opera as its 'over-the-top element' he really found very exciting. Wheatley then elaborates on each of Muldoon's libretti; *Shining Brow*, *Vera of Las Vegas*, and *Bandanna*. One special feature of this essay would be the textual comparison between *Vera of Las Vegas*

and *The Crying Game*, a film by Neil Jordan. And the one between *Bandanna* and Shakespeare's (and Orson Welles') *Othello* is also interesting. One important aspect to which Wheatley calls attention in *Bandanna* is that the border or 'the line' is among the most recurrent symbols there and 'functions as a marker of difference and danger'. Wheatley concludes that with opera Muldoon can 'teeter on the brink — perhaps even go over the top', where poetry may observe all sorts of boundaries and proprieties. Though Muldoon's opera libretti are apt to be regarded as rather subordinate to his poetical works, we should reconsider that the libretti could be appreciated as his original achievements on their own, reading Wheatley's convincing exegesis and assessment on them.

In the last essay, 'Muldoon's Remains', Matthew Campbell focuses on 'exiguous' objects left as remains in Muldoon's later domestic and pastoral elegies. Exiguous remains have been repeatedly mentioned by precedent critics like Corcoran, Kendall and Wills, and inspired by their hints, Campbell expands on the subject here, scrutinising the form and consolation of Muldoon's elegies. Campbell's interpretation on 'The Soap Pig' (from *Meeting the British*), a memorial verse to his friend Michael Hefferman, clarifies his argument well: The soap-pig, a pig-shaped bar of soap, is a gift from Hefferman, which is now in the writer's bathroom. At the last part of the poem, the object is depicted as 'soap-sliver', which diminishes over the time, 'just as the lost one might'. The object, that transient soap, serves as the figure which evokes the feeling for the dead, and at the same time the object remains 'an integral part of the feeling, a gift which is itself an object in the relationship'. This argument of Campbell might appear somehow a paradox, but Campbell pertinently demonstrates that in the pattern of his elegies Muldoon frequently 'clings on to the remains of the absent, the scant fragments of memory or memento which will not allow forgetfulness'. So does he in his grand elegies like 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow': while Muldoon attaches to his stylistic ingeniousness there, he seeks compensation by an attachment not just to memory, but to small things which refuse forgetting.

I have surveyed the points of all the nine essays of the book: they are all beneficial studies with which we could cope with Muldoon's complex poems somehow more assuredly. These essays supply us with many elucidative hints and detailed interpretation on his poems, which are really helpful. While Muldoon states he expects the serendipity in his creative process of rhyming, we can have the serendipity of what Muldoon contrives in his poetry, with the aid of interpretative guides by the authors of this book. The essays discussing Muldoon in American context — specifically Frostian influence, American pragmatism and his opera libretti written in America — seem to me especially enlightening: I suppose American aspects of Muldoon should be given more attention to. And each essay makes us more conscious of Muldoon's creative mind and his original style. After

reading the essays, I was reminded of a sentence in the introduction: the authors are 'engaged in directing attention to complex moments of creativity in which an extraordinary amount of originality is concentrated'. I declare this book can make us renew our understanding of Muldoon's profundity and originality, and make us more suitable readers of Paul Muldoon.

Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*

Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. 307 pp.

Marjorie Perloff, *The Vienna Paradox: A Memoir*

New York: New Directions, 2004. 283 pp.

Reviewed by Peter Robinson, Kyoto Women's University

Marjorie Perloff's intriguing *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) was an enlightening account of writers from a variety of language cultures and traditions. The sections on Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard, as well as the look at contemporary American poetic innovators, were illuminating studies of individual writers. That her authors had been concerned with, or could be usefully read in the light of, Wittgenstein's work was sensibly maintained. The closely researched, detailed, and for the most part lucid studies were by no means experimental in method, establishing a biographical and historical context in which to conduct some close-reading-style examinations of texts. Perloff was much indebted to Ray Monk's biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duties of Genius* (1990). Her studies were given an experimental air and a tenuously unifying thread by the quotations from Wittgenstein's writings that, in the light of the first two chapters, were to illuminate the linguistic and cultural experiment of the texts considered. A number of the philosopher's 'aphorisms' were repeated, with the cumulative effect of draining away confidence that they were more than slogans to which avant-garde notions could be associatively attached.

Wittgenstein's Ladder understood his writings in terms not of the recalcitrant problems that were exercising the philosopher, but as a set of stylistic procedures and theoretical beliefs that rendered other ideas and styles for poetry (first-person lyric, among them) redundant. Her book's title referred to the section late in the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein describes his book as a ladder to be kicked away once climbed. Despite her use of instances from the later writings, *Wittgenstein's Ladder* had more of the philosophy-ends-here in his first phase, than the therapeutic practices of his later linguistic investigations. The mystical aspect of Wittgenstein's