

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL MULDOON

Alexandra Zelman-Doring for the Saint Ann's Review

ALEXANDRA ZELMAN-DORING for THE SAINT ANN'S REVIEW: Are you interested in the avant-garde?

PAUL MULDOON: I believe any interesting poem is in some sense avant-garde. It's unlike anything that has come before it. I think every artist of interest thinks of herself as an avant-gardist. But I think one of the issues with our generally received notion of the avant-garde is that it is actually quite conventional. I fail to see any great advance in any avant-garde movement after Laurence Stern, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Certainly not in the literary arts. Have you read *Tristram Shandy*? Has there been an advance on that? I don't think so. You know, the idea of writing as a visual medium, the visual poem, the blank page, the twirl of the stick, the idea of fracture, of what doesn't come together—which is usually what the avant-garde is about—is interesting up to a point, but at the end of the day fracture is not enough. And most avant-garde movements have to do with some kind of breaking down of some notion of authority or received idea, throwing it all up in the air and waiting to see where it lands. You know, once in a while I can see how we want to do that, but frankly it's not of particular interest to me. Doing something that really has not quite been done before is something I try to do in every poem I write. That's not to say that they all actually don't begin to resemble things that have been done before... maybe we're doomed to repeat certain shapes if we're involved in the business of writing at all.

AZD: Do you know Osip Mandelstam's book *Stone*? I was thinking about that book and your vision of poems as structures.

PM: One way of thinking about the poem and the business of being a poet is as a sculptor-slash-construction worker. I read *Stone* years ago, a very good translation of it by a friend of mine named Robert Tracy. Mandelstam's not the only poet who's interested in the idea of sculpting. Ezra Pound was quite interested in it also. There's quite an interesting book by Donald Davie called *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*. The trouble is that to take any particular line, to

appeal to a single metaphor, never quite tells the whole story. Poetry is about sculpting, of course, but there are aspects to it that are not at all like sculpting, that are more like the management of waterways rather than making something out of stone. So the definition of every metaphor is that it obtains only for a brief moment. I'm not really interested in theories of poetry. Though of course, because one comes from a particular place at a particular time, one does of course fall into that, right?

AZD: Academia?

PM: No, not academia in particular. Though that, mind you, may be an aspect. No, I mean one's historical moment in terms of what is thought to be appropriate in poetry. At the moment, pretty much anything goes. It would be very hard to be an avant-gardist. It's very hard to find a barrier to break down.

AZD: Are you talking about America or Europe as well?

PM: Yes, I do think in America.

AZD: Do you read contemporary fiction? What do you read for fun?

PM: I read very little fiction. I reread fiction, you know, the biggies as it were, and of course I read poetry for a living, really, but for amusement and interest I read non-fiction—history, sociology, anthropology, science, all of that stuff.

AZD: I'm surprised you've never written fiction.

PM: I think a lot of that is about one's habits. You get into a certain habit; to be in the habit of writing poetry is a very particular thing, you know, it's just what I do, and I move at a very, very slow pace; it would take me forever to write a novel and I'm pretty sure it would be absolute rubbish. I'd like to be able to do it but it's too late now. I read a certain amount of contemporary fiction, a few things I feel I absolutely have to read just to be able to walk down the street.

AZD: On the cover of *Horse Latitudes*, Helen Vendler is quoted saying, "Age has deepened Muldoon's poetry." Do you believe that?

PM: I honestly don't know if it has. I think that's as much about her as about

anything else. I think she may have felt at one stage that my poems weren't sufficiently solemn, and that may have to do with her own sense of literary history. I don't know if the poems have changed that much, I don't know if I've changed that much. A number of critics, I think, have been slightly more taken by Seamus Heaney's enterprise and see that as the serious way of going about things; anything that's not manifestly serious can't possibly be serious, anything that has an element of fun at all can't possibly be the genuine article. I've certainly come up against that.

AZD: How do you relate to Heaney's work? Did you ever feel competitive or—?

PM: Over the years I've responded to him, and he's responded to me. For better or worse, there are a lot of interesting poets in Ireland. It's very difficult for us to think about more than one poet per country. I've never felt myself to be in competition with Seamus. The only person I'm in competition with is myself. And I'm not even in competition with myself, I'm in competition with the poem in some ways, if that makes any sense. *How is one going to get this poem written?* That's the big problem. The big concern is, *Am I going to be able to do this at all?* That's the problem every time, you know? And probably the answer each time is that one does one's best and it's not good enough.

AZD: Why?

PM: Because it's just very hard to write a good poem.

AZD: Who's judging if it's good enough?

PM: It judges itself. It's almost as if it uses one. It tests whether or not this vehicle is going to be strong enough for it, the vehicle being the poet. There's no decent metaphor for what I mean. It's almost like a possession, in the conventional sense of being possessed by a demon or something.

AZD: How would you feel reading a book written by a computer?

PM: I'd feel perfectly fine. I love the idea of anonymity.

AZD: This goes beyond anonymity, doesn't it? If we program a computer... to write a book—

PM: Well, we're all programmed to a certain extent. The way we write is so influenced by our moment. I've just been reading the poems of Samuel Beckett. He just happened to start writing poems at a moment when the poems that were successful in Ireland had a certain look to them and a certain feeling, just as when I started writing poems, the idea of what made a poem was a very particular thing. Written by Ted Hughes, or Phillip Larkin, or Thom Gunn, or Sylvia Plath—that's what a poem looked like. Twenty years before that, if one had been starting out, the poem would have looked like Dylan Thomas's. I started out writing poems that looked and sounded like poems by T.S. Eliot. They were so like Eliot as to be problematic. On the other hand one learns by copying people, just as we do in life.

AZD: There's a book called *Code*, recently published, by Israeli poet Eran Hadas. He programmed a computer to find all the haikus in the Hebrew Bible.

PM: I'm very sympathetic to that idea. I have no interest in the personalities of poets. I was brought up very much under the influence of T.S. Eliot and the notion of the impersonality of the poet, and I don't believe that I write my poems. I don't believe that I should take credit for my poems. They just use me as a—I know it sounds crazy but yeah, one is just used. If I were writing these poems—this is not to say they are any good—but if I were writing them, they would be no good.

AZD: You know, just from reading a book like *Quoof*, I feel I know you a bit.

PM: There must be some of me in there, absolutely. The poems come through a particular personality, of course they do, and the fact is they play with ideas of biography. I had a friend who's now dead, I was talking to her years ago and she said, 'How's May?' and I said, 'Who's May?' and she said, 'Your sister.' 'Ah,' I said...so there's a poem in which I refer to my sister May but in fact there's no such person. While it's true that the poems are written by a person that comes from a particular time, a particular place, speaks a particular version of English, my own part in the process is really very minor.

AZD: What got you to write two children's books?

PM: When I had my first child I felt, you know, that it'd be fun to write something quote unquote for children. Actually I'm not sure if writing for children as such is necessarily a great idea. There certainly is a whole tradition of writing for children which I wouldn't want to disparage, but you know, we tend not to think so much about music that is written for children. Frankly I think that children are capable of much more than we tend to give them credit for; just the way that children may listen to Mozart or Bach or Vivaldi or the Beatles or the Stones, they might also be reading or hearing Byron and Donne and Shakespeare, and Marianne Moore and Emily Dickenson.

AZD: What is the most exciting place you've ever read your poetry?

PM: Well, various places come to mind. I'm just back from Singapore...I've read poems in Japan, in China, in Russia, through Europe and Australia and New Zealand, South America, North America. I'm always astonished that anyone would want to hear them, but I have read them all over the place. I'm not sure what the most exotic would have been...Sometimes when the poems have been presented in translation and one really doesn't know exactly what's happening—that's interesting. It may be that the poems people are hearing have absolutely nothing to do with the poems in English.

AZD: I notice you translate.

PM: I do.

AZD: Do you speak the languages that you translate from?

PM: I was better at Irish than English when I was seventeen or twenty. It's still very much part of the enterprise in ways that I'm not even quite aware of, and I know an awful lot about Irish and Gaelic literature. I do quite a lot of translations from Irish. But I would be quite forgiving of the notion that 'someone absolutely understand the language.' I've certainly tried to translate poems from languages that I quote unquote don't know, such as German. I decided to try to translate a couple of Rilke poems just to see what was going on, because I could see that there was something quite extraordinary happening there and I wanted to try to figure out what it was—which is not to say that there's one single thing going on. He's a truly amazing poet. Most of the time with poets, one can sort of figure out how they do it. With some

poets you sort of think, well, how did they do that? Of course that's the sort of poet one wants to be.

AZD: Did you figure it out with Rilke?

PM: No.

AZD: You know the poem, 'Homesickness'?

PM: You mean my own? Well, whoever wrote it, that is. I don't know who wrote that poem! I've no idea who wrote that poem. Were we talking about Rilke? I think Rilke wrote that poem.

AZD: It starts with the 'lion stretched like a sandstone lion on the sandstone slab,' and the images keep changing like a kaleidoscope.

PM: I think whoever wrote Rilke's poems may have written that one.

AZD: Do you remember being there when it was written?

PM: Only sort of. A poem about that. I mean you're talking about translation, I don't remember exactly how it was written, but I sometimes give my students the assignment of imagining a poem in another language and then translating it into English, and I think with that poem and indeed a number of others I...I think maybe that's how I write in some way. It's translated from something else.

AZD: Something beyond, intangible.

PM: Something I definitely know nothing about.

AZD: If writing poetry is this kind of out-of-body, nobody's-home type of experience, is that a bit like some kinds of drugs? Getting away from yourself?

PM: Well, none of these descriptions is really adequate. There's a kind of shamanistic use of drugs in some ways, you know, an opening up the channels as it were. But then the other aspect of the drug thing is, I think—we don't know too much about this, but we get very happy when we see things coming together, when we see patterns, either make them, or as often as not, recognize them. I think I feel less than I make patterns than find them. And those of course are the two big distinctions in ways of thinking about poetry.

But the thing with the drugs: an image or a metaphor comes and you go *huh*, and basically one keeps coming back for more, and that's one of the reasons why people keep on doing it.

AZD: Does the sensation stay the same over the years? Witnessing something coming together?

PM: Things come together and you think, *Wow*. They may not come together as much as you'd like but—if that doesn't happen initially for the writer, it's not going to happen for anybody else. The reader only gets the effect that the writer does. I mean it's the WOW factor that I'm after...I want people to come out of my poems (and they may not of course) but at some level I'd like them to come out saying, *What the hell was that? you know, what happened to me in there? You know?* That's basically how I come out of them myself.

AZD: Did you ever believe in God? Do you remember when you stopped believing, if indeed you did?

PM: I did believe in God, yes. I was brought up as a Catholic, I went to church, I had a religious practice, and in fact I thought about becoming a priest. I don't know if this is still the case but fifty years ago in Ireland every Catholic boy probably entertained the notion of being a priest at some point if only for a few minutes. I was educated by priests—not exclusively but substantially.

AZD: What happened?

PM: Well, I realized that it wasn't for me. I'd imagined that celibacy would have been a big issue. The celibacy of the priest was I think quite difficult to imagine...the notions of being a teenage boy and being celibate don't really sit very comfortably together. I think that was part of it.

AZD: What about God?

PM: I believe in the existence of God but in a very particular sense, in that God is a construct of ours, and is a response to our most noble aspirations, our greatest fears, and, I suppose, the profound sense of emptiness one would feel if one did not believe that there was something, a reason for all this, other than our simply coming into the world, living, and dying. I suppose

I've come to the point where I'm happy to believe just that. we are creatures in this world and we come and go. The way things are going, actually, we're not going to be around for much longer, are we?

AZD: Do you believe that art has power to change things?

PM: I think that art does change things. One's sense of the world is modified by art. Heightened, deepened, and actually changed; through description of the things of the world, one is forced to—if not look at them again, to see them again as if for the first time. So yes. Whether or not that means that literature is going to substantially change aspects of how we live, I wouldn't be so sure about that. I'm not so sure we should expect literature to do that. We don't expect painting to do that, we don't expect cinema to do that, we don't even expect theater to do that, though theater is probably the zone in which it might happen. There may have been moments, in a culture like the Greek culture, where a play about the Peloponnesian war may have changed the official position—but that was in a culture where there was a very small number of people who lived in Athens to begin with. It's not quite as easy as that these days, it's harder to reach...the audience is so disparate, and is so big, there are so many more authors, there are just so many more of us than there were two thousand years ago, a lot more of us.

AZD: I notice that sometimes in your poems a sort of ambience of disbelief gets created, wherein you want to make it clear that what is happening is not necessarily true or to be believed, like when in 'Misfits' you begin, 'If and when I did look up'—I know you don't know why you do anything, but....

PM: 'If and when I did look up'...I suppose in general I don't believe in fixities and certainties, everything is up for grabs.

AZD: And you do grab, so many things. So many names and nouns and proper nouns that bring with them a lot of connotations—sometimes it seems you would like the whole world to be included, in a way.

PM: I've never really thought about it, but now that you mention it, the impulse to include is one I have. And of course the impulse to exclude, also one I have. The two great examples in the twentieth century: Joyce, the great

includer, and Beckett. When Joyce was writing, he got everything in; his ambition was to put everything in. Beckett of course, partly in reaction to that, wants to get rid of everything. Those two impulses are, for most people, coincidental, i.e. they happen together. I think writing is about getting rid of stuff, clearing things, but also, you know, focusing on the things that need to be included at this particular moment.

AZD: Does inclusion have anything to do with themes?

PM: I'm not thinking about themes, no. Critics think about themes, students think about themes. I often quote W. B. Yeats on the only two fit subjects for an inquiring mind...some grandiloquent gesture he was making...he said sex and the dead are the only two themes, really, to which one would say yes, that's right, but you know spring rolls are also a good theme, and so is lemonade, you know, and beetroot. One could actually spend one's whole life writing about beetroot, lemonade, and spring rolls. The whole world could come to be included in those two or three ideas. In one sense of course, since the poem may be about anything at all, at some level it doesn't matter what it's about.

AZD: Not even when you write a political poem?

PM: Some of my poems, I suppose, are more wittingly political, yes. Sometimes my views on America have been more to the fore than my views on Ireland. Do you mean political in that sense?

AZD: Yes.

PM: But even when the poems are political in that sense I don't think they are political in the Brechtian sense, you know? I'm not really trying to change anything much, just to reflect something of being alive at a particular moment. It would seem very strange, if one looked at a poet functioning between 1939 and 1945, and there was absolutely no reference to what we now think of as the second world war—I wouldn't want to say that it's completely impossible. It would just look a bit strange. I think if one is demi-, semi-conscious, that this stuff is going to get into the writing. Same with Ireland.

AZD: What about Ireland?

PM: I was brought up in a certain time in Ireland, and it was inevitable that my poems would include some of that stuff.

AZD: You were part of a group, then, right, the Group, right?

PM: Well, there was a thing called the Belfast Group, yes, I mean we weren't sitting around saying, 'We are the Belfast Group.' But it's certainly the case that poets do present themselves in groups, often to get some kind of attention, I suppose. You think of the language poets, the Fugitives, the New Formalists, you know—however they would describe themselves—you can see how each of those groups felt obliged to present themselves as belonging to something. It's like the avant-garde that we were talking about earlier. I don't think writers or artists of any kind really have any interest to belong to anything at all. You know? I don't want to subscribe to any acceptable view. I don't want to say this is what I think about this. Because things change. And one of the adventures of being an artist is to imagine what it's like being somebody else, to hold another opinion.

AZD: Let's forget about artistic schools and movements....what about a notion of community?

PM: I do find that most writers function in isolation really. Novels and poems are not collaborative projects. However, I quite like going to festivals. I'm always quite moved to see lots of other poets, and to realize that for whatever reason, all of these people from all over the world have found themselves doing this same thing, putting one word after another. That's really all it is. Or: being instructed by one word after another. In that sense of course it's a little bit like God. At the end of the day the idea of God is a very selfish one, paradoxically. I'm much more interested in the idea that as with poetry, we're just vehicles for DNA. And that's a not unworthy calling. As a poet one inherits a set of texts, I suppose, a set of assumptions, or various sets of assumptions, and if one's very lucky one might have some little contribution to make, that would push things out in another direction and then, you know, someone else picks it up. In that sense, I like the idea of the very large group in which one is almost nameless. Does this make any sense?

AZD: It does.

PM: It would be great to be able to write a poem, sit back, and have one's poem sort of sung by the people or read by the people, and they wouldn't know who wrote it, maybe they'd feel that they'd written it themselves, you know? I'm attracted to that. That's an ideal of the poem as an object that is at once of its time and place, but also beyond it.