

LUCID LUDIC



Patrick Crotty

PAUL MULDOON, *Hay*. Faber and Faber, £7.99

“For ‘ludic’”, advises one of the corrigenda that run like a stand-up’s gag through Paul Muldoon’s latest and most richly orchestrated collection of poems, “read ‘lucid’”. Muldoon’s playfulness has probably irritated as many readers as it has delighted over the years, and it has generally been essayed at the expense of accessibility. While *Hay* is at times as teasingly rebarbative as any of its seven predecessors, it contains a number of poems of translucent limpidity, confirming a trend glimpsed in the elegy for Mary Farl Powers in *The Annals of Chile* (1994) whereby the poet’s characteristic impulse towards the ludic is countered by a hankering after plain speaking. Indeed one of the new poems, “They that Wash on Thursday”, takes the form at once of a game played with clichés and proverbs featuring the word “hand”—each of the fifty lines ends with the word—and of a series of apparently frank autobiographical reflections. Why the ludic and the lucid should heretofore have been seen as antinomies by the poet—and by the more antagonistic among his critics—is a moot point. For both, questions of authenticity would appear to have been at stake. Helen Vendler complained of a hole in the middle of the poetry where the feeling should be. Yet the trap-setting, cliché-exploding, sardonically allusive dimension of Muldoon’s work is perhaps best understood as a strategy for avoiding the false feeling and dud illumination of a certain (too certain) kind of Irish poem, as a strategy, that is to say, for emotional honesty. It is arguable for instance that “The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants” (from *Quoof*, 1983) provides the most morally engaged poetic exploration of the nature of Northern Irish political violence yet published, though the poem’s ostensible status as a mock sonnet sequence with a baffling narrative of drug smuggling, shamanism and sexual trickery promises nothing of the kind.

Textual trickery elicits almost as much distrust as trickery of the sexual kind, which perhaps explains why Muldoon has brought out the worst in some of his more eminent critics. John Carey’s frequently quoted grumble about *Meeting the British* (1987) being “loaded to the gunwales with Higher Education”, while not without justification, deflects attention from the contribution of Lower Education—drug slang, urban myth,

popular culture generally—to the Muldoon project. Though one can imagine the poet's pleasure in flushing Carey's bluff Anglo-Saxon populism, his ideal reader would need to be more lowbrow as well as more highbrow than the Merton Professor. This is particularly true where the new volume is concerned. *Hay* weds a self-consciously Dantesque concern with finding one's bearings in the middle of life to a fascination with the arcana of rock music. This is in evidence not only in "Sleeve Notes", a twenty-one part species of autobiography by l.p.—which incorporates some comically incisive critical aperçus, for instance on the later work of Bob Dylan—but in the most ambitious poem in the book. "The Bangle (Slight Return)" consists of a series of thirty sonnets which conflate a narrative of the middle-aged speaker's inept choice of courses and wines in a sophisticated Parisian restaurant with a hallucinatory re-rendering of Vergil's account of Aeneas's unsuccessful attempt to rescue his wife Creusa from the ruins of Troy, and a series of alternative histories of the poet's own father. These latter are rather more urgent in implication than the alternative history of English Romanticism elaborated by Muldoon in *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990)—in this reviewer's opinion the most thinly spread of the his collections—since neither the poet nor the poetry would have come into existence had any of the possibilities adumbrated by them been realised in Patrick Muldoon's actual life.

Perhaps no poet since Hugh MacDiarmid in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* has meditated as searchingly on the limitations and foregone opportunities involved in any act of choice as Muldoon does here. The title of the sequence is borrowed from that of Jimi Hendrix's tumultuous five-minute 1968 single "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)", which owed its parenthetical part to the fact that it was recorded the day after an even wilder, twenty-minute "jamming" version of the same song with additional musicians. What are we to make of the fact that the poem to which Muldoon's "slight return" harks back—"The Bangle"—is very much shorter and in every respect slighter than its namesake?

The issue of the relationship between personal choice and the form which an individual life takes is adumbrated by the extraordinarily elaborate architectonics of *Hay*. As Clair Wills points out in her indispensable study of the poet, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), "each of the thirty sonnets [in "The Bangle (Slight Return)"] uses six of the ninety rhyme words from "Yarrow" [the long poem which concludes *The Annals of Chile*] (rhyming ababcdcdfegef), in the order in which they first occur in the earlier poem—which gets you to sonnet 15, and then the whole pattern is repeated in reverse." The same ninety rhyme words occur, in the same order, in the opening poem of *Hay*,

“The Mud Room”, and also in “Third Epistle to Timothy”, a recreation of an episode in the poet’s father’s early life. The variety of mood and poetic effect achieved within the iron formal boundaries of these poems significantly enriches the book’s “argument” about the tension between determinism, decision and chance.

A mud room is a sort of cross between porch and utility room which is a feature of the poet’s, as of many American houses. Appropriately, one enters the house of *Hay* through the poem called after it. “The Mud Room” is perhaps the most genially comic poem in the book, a narrative at once of an indoor quest for the afikoman (a cake of matzo bread hidden for a ritual children’s game) still hidden since the previous year’s Passover festivities, and an outdoor chase after a French mountain goat which treads “upon the brink / of meaning”. The goat, “bounding, vaulting, pausing in mid-career”, is to some extent a facetious redaction of the poet himself. One of the key tropes of the book, demarcation—between beginnings and endings, ideals and actualities, youth and age, domesticity and wild(er)ness, life and art—is introduced and almost relentlessly repeated in a dazzling display of figurative variations on the single theme of middlelessness. Any suggestion that Muldoon is too rhetorically resourceful for his own good, and fails to account for that other middle, “where the feeling should be”, is confounded by “Third Epistle to Timothy”, easily the most moving and direct of the poems about his father which have been a staple of his production for more than twenty years. The “Epistle” focuses on the older Muldoon’s experience as an eleven year old worker on the farm of the Protestant, Hardys, and of his sectarian abuse at the hands of a fellow-worker. His victimhood is underscored by echoes of “Out—, Out—”, Robert Frost’s disconsolate narrative of the death of a farm-boy. The last stanza brings the “hay” motif of the book (frequently jocular in its other manifestatons) to a deeply compassionate, notably political climax:

That next haycock already summoning itself from windrow after
wind-weary windrow
while yet another brings itself to mind in the acrid stink
of turpentine. There the image of Lizzie,
Hardy’s last servant-girl, reaches out from her dais
of salt hay, stretches out an unburned arm
half in bestowal, half beseechingly, then turns away to appeal
to all that spirit-troop
of hay-treaders as far as the eye can see, the coil on coil
of hay from which, in the taper’s mild uproar,

they float out across the dark face of the earth, an earth without form, and void.

The lesser poems in the book (some, it must be said, very much lesser—*Hay* features a higher number of pedestrian pieces than is usual in a Muldoon collection) while impressively diverse in form and mood are closely focused on the themes announced in “The Mud Room”. Among the most notable are “Aftermath”, an admirably succinct “take” on the dividing line between culture and violence; “Long Finish”, a witty, grave, equally ludic and lucid marking of the boundary between public and private; and “Symposium”, a sonnet constructed by splitting clichés down the middle and conjoining their fractured halves to the wrong partners. It may be fitting to close this review of a remarkable book with a few lines of advice from the latter:

A bird in the hand is better than no bread.
To have your cake is to pay Paul.
Make hay while you can still hit the nail on the head.