

## THE END OF THE LECTURE

by **James McGonigal***The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry*by **Paul Muldoon**

Faber &amp; Faber, 2006

ISBN-13: 978-0-571-22740-2, 406pp, £25.00, hbk.

THIS BOOK IS BEYOND ME. It seems deliberately written to push beyond the boundaries of interpretation by its deployment of riddling association, provocative wordplay, insight and second sight. In his teasing out of the multiple meanings of poetic “ends”—from the last words on the page, to the points where a poem can be said to end and the poet’s biography to begin, to the ends where a writer’s poems can be said to abut, complement or even complete each other, to the odds and ends of arcane verbal and literary association, and more—Muldoon sets alarm bells ringing. This is the end of the lecture as we know it: in *The End of the Poem*, his Oxford lectures on poetry, he pushes beyond critical judgment into realms of reading that challenge most norms of definition.

This is a very “Irish” book, not only in the factual sense that the lectures are written and delivered by one Irishman at the behest of another (Tom Paulin), and begin and end with lectures on Irish poems, with cross-referencing throughout to Irish poets and critics. It is also Irish in the more pejorative sense (in English) of being seemingly illogical, cross-grained but also meandering, meditative, multi-directional, possibly ironic, garrulous and *sui generis*. To that extent, the lectures possess the same ability as Muldoon’s poems do to confuse the reader by their mixture of fidelity and flash. Being ancestrally three-quarters Irish myself, I began reading about the middle, with lecture 6 on Stevie Smith’s poem ‘I Remember’:

It was my bridal night I remember,  
An old man of seventy-three  
I lay with my young bride in my arms,  
A girl with t.b.

Here the poetic end to be discussed is announced as the end in *gender*. It is clear from the deft linkage to the preceding and succeeding lectures on Emily Dickinson and Robert Lowell that there is a care for structure in the collection that balances the disturbing intensity of its post-structuralism. We note in passing, too, the gender balance of female to male poets (six of the fifteen poems studied are by women, and another is written for a dead one, Sylvia Plath); and of American to European writers (again six out of fifteen). This lecture begins with a subtle analysis of the role of punctuation in creating the unsettling tone of Smith’s poem, and

moves on to resonances of wartime and post-war poetry in works by Hood, Hardy, Edward Thomas and Larkin, discovering echoes, parallelisms, nuances. The lecture ends with biographical speculation that the girl with t.b. is Smith, who spent part of her childhood in a sanatorium, and the old man might well have been George Orwell, the place Hampstead Heath and the night-bombers overhead possibly glimpsed in their sexual encounter *en plein air*.

The Robert Lowell lecture failed to grip, so I turned back to the beginning of Muldoon's ends, the opening lecture of the series which is on W.B. Yeats' 'All Souls' Night'. Here the end seems simpler, deceptively so: the italicised date and place given after the final line of the poem, *Oxford, Autumn 1920*. Again, the writing is very good on Yeats' early rhythmical revisions and on echoes from Keats. Muldoon emphasises that one of the unlikely and generally overlooked aspects of reading a poem has to do with "the intermittent quality of our reading, so that having begun it, and proceeded a little into it, one may now leap back to the beginning, now again look forward" (pp. 10–11). Or indeed sideways: for now Muldoon leaps from a Yeatsian echo of Keats' "palate fine" in 'Ode on Melancholy' to his line "Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains" in 'Ode to a Nightingale', to another word that might have been substituted for drains, but wasn't, which is lees, and on then to the surname of Yeats' young spiritualist wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees who is the presiding spirit not only of the poem but of *A Vision*, the prose work to which it is an "epilogue" (p. 14).

He had admittedly given prior warning that he was about to make several suggestions that might strike his listeners as quite outlandish. Later, the word "cork", again unmentioned in the poem but possibly, like the word "lees", a resisted usage, is used by Muldoon to explain the precision of the date with which the poem ends: the Irish republican mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, had died in Brixton Prison only a few days earlier, and on November 1st, the day before All Souls Night, Kevin Barry, an IRA volunteer also from County Cork, was hanged in Dublin, and soon immortalised in the ballad that bears his name. Muldoon is concerned here to re-entangle the poem in its context. These political spectres at the formal feast of the poem are an idea that Yeats "is determined not to allow, and which he manages almost successfully" (p. 26). This is the first inkling we get that the poet's mind and how it works, what it stores and what it evades, as much as what it formalises, is the true subject of these lectures.

The second lecture, on 'The Literary Life' by Ted Hughes, reveals that the poet's mind can also be a vengeful one. The end of the poem here is where it borders biography, and the link with Yeats is through Hughes' and Plath's use of spirit messengers through Ouija board sessions, and the winding stair that they take up to Marianne Moore's apartment in New York, early in their poetic careers. The vengeance cuts both ways: the poem enacts Moore's nicely acerbic dismissal of an upstart and ambitious rival, Sylvia Plath, as much as Hughes' revenge on Moore:

Her lips that put me in mind of a child's purse  
 Made of the skin of a dormouse,  
 Her cheek, as if she had powdered the crumpled silk  
 Of a bat's wing.

There is the pointed reference in this lecture to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and his Freudian theory of major poetic figures "with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors ... But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness" (p. 42). The real rival that Moore needed to watch may have been Hughes not Plath, as Muldoon proceeds to compare Hughes' poetic method of accrual with Moore's earlier characteristic use of this style, a piling of detail upon detail towards an effect of armour or chain mail. (Look out for lecture 10 on Moore herself, where the poet's name comes to signify a Moor-ish aesthetic of damascene and arabesque, and punningly "more" besides.) Ultimately, Hughes' poem is read as a spell he has cast against the elder American poet, and the lecture ends with a suggestion of numerological symbolism (the poem's 57 lines pointing to 1957 when elder and younger poets met) that echoes the more stately symbolism of Yeats' 100 lines in 1920, with which the first lecture closed, reaching back to the composition date of Keats' late 'To Autumn' one hundred years earlier.

This patterning or interlacing (also Irish) of lecture with lecture continues with the starting point for the third, on Robert Frost's 'The Mountain', which harks back to Marianne Moore's perception of the place of complementary pairings in Frost's poetry. The end of the poem here is where one poem fills out blanks or partial end-points in another. Muldoon makes great play with Frost's gaps and elisions: his name connotes whiteness, mists, hoar frost, rime and rhyme, as well as the 'blankness' of blank verse. He reminds us here that there is *élan* in Ireland, and even an African eland, that makes a highly unlikely crossing of one of Frost's chilly stretches of water.

More seriously, 'The Mountain' is in dialogue with 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. This lecture is insightful on stasis and freeze-frame in Frost, and makes interesting connections too with Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence', 'Michael' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', seated "by the highway side / On a low structure of rude masonry / Built at the foot of a huge hill". Thus there are traditional voices heard beyond Muldoon's verbal play, and Wordsworth is indeed one of the presences behind these readings, which appear to record the growth of a poet's mind (Muldoon's) in a postmodern age; or rather, what that mind has grown into by its blend of poetic intuition, craft, and subtle academic reading and deliberate misreading of precursor poets.

In all of this approach to reading, in its combination of nonsense with a most acute sense of alertness to echo and allusion, I think that Muldoon is pointing

up the hypersensitivity of any poet's mind in its response to words, their sounds and connotations, and to the great poetic and symbolic tilth of stairs, towers, bells, forests, waters and shores, a tonal landscape in which the significant poets in every generation are condemned to strive to achieve their individual ends of articulation. Of course, this "end" may be a final state, death or self-destruction. Or they may "come to an end", exhausted. As the reader may also do: in one of the lectures (I forget which) Muldoon barely gets beyond the poem's opening stanza. But he is, on the other hand, illuminating on "stanza" and what it stands for, and on enjambment, and a cute reader (as the Irish might say), and no slouch as a talker.

He puns on this risky skill as being that of the stunt reader or stunt writer. Just as a stunt rider takes the star's place in physically dangerous circumstances, so the poet's role is that of stunt reader of the original essence of a poem, whose meaning lies almost beyond grasp. Translators of poems sometimes place on record this sense of struggling for fidelity to an original essential text which exists beyond the foreign language in which it happened to be first caught. Montale's 'L'anguilla / The Eel' is the slippery customer that half a dozen good poets fail to grip in lecture 8.

The stunt writer is, subsequently, the reader of the poem (who is also the poet, obviously, in the first instance, although s/he may have things to hide, or indeed be blinded by the finely created surface of words) but any future reader can be alerted to other resonances that have been missed or denied. Hence Muldoon's bravura displays of criticism that can play with surface and sincerity in the same puzzling way as his own poems do. I found finally that the interest of this or that lecture resided for me in the quality of the individual poems that were their subject. I'm glad to have missed the lectures on Lowell, Auden, Tsvetayeva and Pessoa, but now look with opened eyes and ears at Dickinson, Bishop, H.D., Arnold and C. Day-Lewis.

That Muldoon has now become the Irish poet to beat, perhaps supplanting the precursor who set him on his poetic feet (I evade two Muldoonish puns at this point) opens up another aspect of his lectures. Heather Clark's recent book, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972* (Oxford University Press, 2007), recounts how Seamus Heaney assumed leadership of Philip Hobsbaum's influential Group in Belfast when the latter moved to Glasgow in 1966, and how he first introduced Muldoon's work to his own editors at Faber and Faber. From this viewpoint, Heaney is both a powerful precursor poet and reader to be surpassed. In particular, his own Oxford Lectures on Poetry, published as *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), also deal with borderlines and the ultimate ends of poetry, and what he terms "the frontiers of writing". In Heaney's case, this includes the bloody borderline, the "red selvedge" between Northern Ireland and the South, and one of the ancient meanings of redress that he cites is the calling back to heel of hunting hounds, or the dogs of war. Heaney is movingly direct in his own lectures on

the tensions of the poet's position in Oxford and in Northern Ireland, within the context of his own and his community's life in the late twentieth century.

Muldoon deliberately writes out of a more obliquely theoretical and postmodernist position, and yet in one sense this collection also pays tribute to ancestry and upbringing, through its frequent recall of Irish poets and critics in foreign places. But in another way Muldoon is doing what all strong sons must do: to leave home, to strike out, to go beyond the gable end of the farmhouse, to make a new life and style for himself, if needs be in another country and culture. This may involve encountering disapproval and a measure of guilt. Heaney had done this before him, of course, but Muldoon now goes further and in a more thorough-going and free-floating fashion.

In the last lecture of all he tackles three precursor Irish poets in one go: Graves (Irish through his father), Day-Lewis and Heaney, all previous givers of the Oxford lectures on poetry and major presences. What would they have made of all his re-reading of reading? The end of the lecture comes as a surprise, with a charming response to Heaney's poem of family piety, 'Keeping Going', written in praise of his farmer brother's persistence and humour. So in the end we gain a strong impression that Muldoon is also placing himself fraternally among his Irish poetic kin, as one who still belongs, or at any rate is concerned to remind us that he retains a deep fidelity towards the culture that formed him, as it had shaped them. On the final page, turning the leaf for more, I found myself surprised to be saddened at losing his clever and companionable voice, which had rattled on to sometimes brilliant, sometimes maddening effect for so long that I was reminded of being a school teacher again, with the brightest, most loquacious boy or girl in the class leaving a silence when they quit the room that is both welcome and regretted.