

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR SEAN RYDER**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 3 December 2012 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **PROFESSOR PAUL MULDOON**

A Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

In the heavily populated world of poetry, in an age when we cannot but be aware of the enormous and intimidating back catalogue of the past, and at a point in history in which one may be tempted to doubt the possibility of creating anything new that isn't a remix or a recycling, it is not easy to find a poet with the confidence and craft to make poetry that is genuinely fresh, a poetry that extends the canon rather than simply replays it.



Yet Paul Muldoon is certainly such a poet. In his 11 volumes of poetry over a period of 40 years his has been a striking and compelling voice for readers of poetry not just in Ireland but all over the English - speaking world. It is a recognisable voice by now - alternately wry and dark, sometimes facetious, sometimes in deadly earnest. Always testing and torturing and playing with the language we all think we know, and making us realise we have only been using it at a fraction of its capacity.

Paul Muldoon was born in Co Armagh and educated at Queen's University, Belfast. Since 1987 he has lived in the United States, where he is now Howard GB Clark '21 Professor at Princeton University, and Founding Chair of the Lewis Center for the Arts. He has held the post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and since 2007 has been poetry editor at *The New Yorker* magazine. He is a member of Aosdána, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the recipient of too many prizes to enumerate here, among which are the Pulitzer Prize and the T S Eliot Prize.

In trying to account for this success, there are several things to notice. One is what you might call a lack of discrimination in Paul Muldoon's poetry - which might sound like an accusation of failure, as if he can't discriminate the wheat from the chaff - but is in fact the very opposite: a mark of liberation and a strength. All of thought and experience is welcome, without prejudice, at his poetic table, where he will transform the banal into the magical, the sublime into the quotidian, the local into the global, the colloquial into the densely allusive.

How is this done? The most fitting word may be 'wit', wit in the Elizabethan sense, not merely signifying quirky humour (though there is plenty of that) but also describing the apt association of thought and expression, intelligence and craft, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness. Sometimes in Paul Muldoon's work, this involves making strange verbal and imagistic juxtapositions of a kind so beloved by John Donne and the 17th century metaphysical poets, though here with modern materials. Sometimes it involves the relentless pursuit of a sound, a rhyme, a repeated word that is jarred out of its expected place or pressed into service to become momentarily strange, foreign, multi-dimensional. The great Russian linguist Viktor Shklovsky argued in 1917 that poetry is that which 'de-familiarises' reality - that which shakes us out of our complacency in the interest of seeing the world anew, as if for the first time. Muldoon's verse does this continually, throwing us giddily off balance, but in a way that keeps us coming back for more.

One of the most anthologised of Paul Muldoon's poems is the short lyric 'The Lass of Aughrim', which seems to take us on a trip from the world evoked by 19th-century Irish song, up the Amazon river, to an encounter with a native boy playing the 'Lass of Aughrim' on a flute made from the tibia of a long-dead missionary. It is a startling and unnerving encapsulation of a

globalised, postcolonial, migratory world that is bizarre, familiar, funny, and chilling all at the same time. The poem is typically allusive too. James Joyce is there in the allusion to the tragic song that plays such a central part in Joyce's story 'The Dead'. But hovering there too is the startling imagery of the 1980s film *The Mission*, or maybe Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*. The lyric irresistibly spins together the literary, the popular, the past, the present, the serious and the surreal in a way that is utterly unique.

All of Paul Muldoon's work, from his first book to his most recent, reflects a powerful curiosity, a restlessness, an openness, and an absolute delight in what the magic toolbox of language can do. It is a serious playfulness of a style more often found in the American than the Irish poetic tradition – and it is not surprising that Paul Muldoon is a poet who seems at home in both countries.

But poetry isn't the only string to his bow. Muldoon is a powerful reader of the poetry of others, and his critical essays are fascinating explorations of the vast echo chamber of literary tradition, drawing attention to the ways in which all poems can lead us off in quite exhilarating ways to other poems, reflecting, refracting and acting as sounding boards. In fact the power of sound and music is a central part of the creative world of Paul Muldoon, a man who has written opera libretti with Daron Hagen, written songs with the late great Warren Zevon, and has been known to take the stage with guitar in hand himself.

It is tremendously fitting that the National University of Ireland should today honour the remarkable creativity of Paul Muldoon, an Irishman whose place as one of the great poets of the English language is assured, and whose work continues to delight, to challenge and to inspire.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.