

Introduction

Paul Muldoon is one of the most recognizable and original figures on the contemporary poetic scene. A prize-winning poet, playwright, librettist, translator, rock-band lyricist whose work links high and low culture and juggles identities in a truly postmodern and “protean” (Jarniewicz 2014: 141) manner, Muldoon embodies the pluralistic spirit as well as the complexities of cultural expression characterizing our times.

This volume has been inspired by the poet’s unforgettable visit to the Faculty of English, at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The poet had accepted the invitation to the 11th edition of the Literature in English Symposium and a series of related lectures and seminars organized between 14-16th of May, 2015, by the Department of English Literature and Literary Linguistics and co-sponsored by the City of Poznań as part of the program Academic Poznań. The theme of the conference – *Poetry and Beyond* – explains also the choice of the conference’s honorary guest and protagonist – Muldoon’s intriguing oeuvre and “migrant persona”, which comprise and overcome his Northern Irish roots, escape easy categorizations and push “beyond” established genres, geopolitical boundaries and aesthetic judgments.

Having arrived in Poznań via New York, Manchester and Wrocław, Muldoon appeared to us a true poet-on-the road who cultivates his transnational identity also through his nomadic life style. Being used to traveling back and forth between the USA, Britain and Ireland, also as part of his annual tour de universities, the poet was not at least discouraged by a longish train journey to the capital of Wielkopolska and his return trip via Warsaw to Liverpool. Visiting three Polish cities and travelling across Poland within three intense and eventful days, the poet never lost his contagious curiosity and enthusiasm for people, landscape and cross-cultural observations. One of the anecdotes from the Poznań visit seems especially remarkable, as in many ways it fuels also major concerns of the whole volume. When asked by the university administration to produce a passport for the necessary documentation of his stay in Poznań, the poet disar-

mingly answered “which one?”, as he was ready to present all the three passports in his current possession. “Questioni[ng] its own authority along with origins, foundations, heritage, precedent, preceptor and pedigree” (1980: 197-198), as aptly noted by Edna Longley, Muldoon’s poetry has tried out, absorbed and revised diverse idioms, registers, legacies, positions and labels. This divided identity and the destabilized, dialogic relations between the poet’s composite and anti-authoritarian conceptions of identity became the grounds for the investigations collected in the present volume. The primary intention was not so much to map Muldoon’s poetry within a specific nationalistic, aesthetic, theoretical or cultural grid but to show how ingeniously it blurs and escapes such mappings. “Muldoon makes it clear,” Jerzy Jarniewicz observes in his analysis of *Bandanna*, “that this blurring of the borders should be related to a particular view of *the condition humane*: life is a continuous process of border-crossing, human beings are trespassers always hovering between clearly defined states, but never being able to settle in one or the other” (2014: 169). Thus, all the four essays collected in the present volume interrogate Muldoon’s conceptualizations of poetry as a realm which allows for an oscillation between centripetal and centrifugal forces, where the private idiom of the self can successfully communicate social, public and communal concerns and where the seemingly local and national suddenly resounds with the vibrant plethora of foreign, translational influences and voices.

The curious enchantments of Muldoon’s idiosyncratic idiom, enhanced by the poet’s charismatic performances of his poems and the subsequent lively exchange with the Poznań audience, left us all under a strong spell, proving that poetry can be a vital, serious, and deeply engaging artform. Our individual encounters and conversations with the poet during the conference and afterwards have also proven more than rewarding, as they greatly complicated our perception of the poet’s “self” and his elusive identity, revealing an intense curiosity of other voices, idioms, traditions and selves at the heart of Muldoon’s aesthetic practice and personal life. One of the most memorable moments of Muldoon’s stay in Poznań was the poetry workshop during which the poet not only talked about his creative process but also revealed a few tricks of his trade. Humble as Muldoon is, he claimed that he does not see himself as an extraordinary individual, but rather as a man who was very lucky to have met the right people who encouraged him to pursue his goals, naming Seamus Heaney as one of his major mentors. Somewhat to our disappointment, then, Muldoon said that

there is nothing mysterious or divine in writing poetry and, as if echoing Alexander Pope, he claimed that anybody can become a poet. In Muldoon's eyes, however, to become a good poet one needs not so much to follow the ancients as to follow one's ambitions and be determined enough not to let the world discourage one from writing. After all, poetry writing is a painstaking and oftentimes frustrating process of composing verses, playing with rhythm and rhyme. Most importantly, however, aspiring poets have to keep their eyes and hearts open to the mysteries of the world around us, as no association or experience is too trivial or abstract to be a potentially groundbreaking idea for a poem. To prove his words, Muldoon prepared for us an exercise in abstract thinking and poetry writing, kindly claiming to have been impressed by our ideas.

During the main event of the Poznań meeting, which was the poet's public lecture, we were lured into his rich Imaginarium through curious anecdotes, histories and intertexts which the poet generously and spontaneously shared with us. The poem "Gathering mushrooms" translated for this occasion (not without some trepidation, as the translator himself admitted) by our former student and passionate reader of Muldoon's poetry, Jakub Sajkowski, proved a perfect ground for the encounter with the poet's challenging and cryptic style, revealing his language as heavily stratified with historical and personal experience.

Taking its cue from Muldoon's own misreadings and renewals of his identity as a poet and citizen, the trajectory of the study, as implied by the collection's title, moves between the broadly understood categories of the self and other. However, the adopted "frame" encompasses various critical perspectives and should be seen as a flexible rather than constraining limit for the following interrogations. It must be also said that the discussions have been inspired by personal critical and theoretical interests of the authors, hence the inclusion of methodologically diverse approaches and a selective choice of the material for each analysis. Thus the analyses move from a generic enquiry into the constructedness of the poet's "self" as visible in the relationship between Muldoon's (auto)biography and cultural legacy (Liliana Sikorska), through a "geopoetical" study of the poet's commitment to a nomadic and transnational understanding of space and place (Joanna Jarzab-Napierała), a critical interrogation of the Western narratives of colonization on the example of *Madoc: A mystery* (Marta Frączak-Dąbrowska), to close off with a selective examination of Muldoon's "intertextual" method on the basis of his engagement with the

American poetic tradition (Paulina Ambroży). The structure of the collection follows the above assumptions and concerns. Thus, Chapter One looks at Paul Muldoon's early poetry collections which provide not only an insight into the poets' maturation process but first and foremost offer glimpses into the poet's life's journeys – in the literal as well as metaphorical sense, they comprise Muldoon's own as well as the reader's quest into the poet's past. Although lyrical self-expression is far from autobiographical narratives, autobiographical elements nevertheless function as inspirations for the poet's exploration and interpretation of his experiences. Hailed as one of the most interesting, albeit whimsical and difficult voices of his generation, Muldoon's output attracted critical attention, all the more so because his early poetry, namely the four volumes published before his immigration to America *New weather* (1973), *Mules* (1977), *Why Brownlee left* (1980) and *Quoof* (1983), combine his personal views with the acute awareness of the historical moment. Even though Muldoon's poetry escapes the politicized reductive label of an "Irish verse" – while remaining transcultural and truly postmodern – it is nevertheless deeply informed by Irish history and culture. In the discussed poems, historical events that influenced the poets' life are presented through the recollections of his mother and father, and through the poet's evocations of his childhood memories. Accordingly, this chapter offers a reading of Paul Muldoon's early poetry in the framework of (auto)biographical elements and through the prism of the historical and cultural context of Ireland, so as to see what happens when the personal is transformed into the political (or social) and, conversely, when the political becomes the personal, as each and every poem forms the imaginative geography of the poet's life.

The second chapter, "'Out' to the mainland, 'in' to the island" – Paul Muldoon's *Kerry Slides* as a geopoetical *immram* to the West of Ireland", focuses on one particular moment in Paul Muldoon's life, namely his stay at Dingle. The time spent in the Kerry area marks the poet's last stop in Ireland before his final departure for America. His poetic reflections on this place collected in *Kerry Slides* serve as an example of the poet's postmodern perception of space. Therefore, the proposed reading of the collection employs the perspective of geopoetics which sheds a new light on Muldoon's nomadic approach towards a sense of place. The poet's questioning of the traditional sense of belonging brings him close to a transnational perception of being in the world. The analysis of poems from *Kerry Slides*, accompanied by several examples from the poet's other collections, bespeaks

of the poet's identity as based on the act of movement. Muldoon's continuous travels result in his geopoetic experiencing of places, showing also his fascination with voyage tales. By going back to traditional Irish genres of *immram* and *aisling*, the poet underlines the travelling nature of his nation. As will be shown in the following discussion, Muldoon's revisionary engagement with this cultural heritage opens up new possibilities for reading the traditional landscape of the West of Ireland, which too long has been dominated by one narration going back to the Celtic Revival. Conversely with the traditional images provided by a photographer Bill Doyle, the poems depict the Dingle Peninsula as an international place where tradition mingles with modernity, which might be read as a symbolic door to other places, other narratives. The geopoetic reading of the Kerry landscape leads to the deconstruction of the traditional image of the West of Ireland, which further testifies to the postmodern quality of Muldoon's poetry.

Chapter Three focuses on one of Muldoon's longest and most complex poems – *Madoc: A mystery* (1990) – within which the poet reinvents the history of North America's conquest and places two of the most important poets of the English Romanticism, Coleridge and Southey, in the middle of the North American Plains. In this largely experimental piece, Muldoon uses history as a pretext to comment on the condition of the post-imperial Western world, the legacy of colonialism and colonial narratives of race and identity. Therefore, the chapter centres not so much on historical facts and figures re-imagined by the poet but on the way the language of poetry deconstructs the well established image of the past propagated by history books and homogenous narratives of national and ethnic belonging. In so doing, as argued in the essay, *Madoc* goes beyond the creation of a fictional (hi)story of the West, revealing the truly transcultural roots of the Western cultural identity which has always been shaped in the shadows of an overwhelming and unstoppable transcontinental movement of people and goods – globalization. Moreover, recognizing a deeply personal nature of Muldoon's poetry, the study connects the poem with Muldoon's own transcultural journeys in both their physical and metaphysical dimensions. After all, *Madoc* (re)constructs not only the grand narratives of the Western world but also Muldoon's own, and deeply personal, experience of transcultural migrations. Thus, it proves that our identity is but a sum of diverse cultural ingredients we have collected throughout our lives, which, in turn, makes the poem a significant, and surprisingly timely, voice in many a difficult debate on cultural, political and racial *otherness*.

Chapter Four examines Paul Muldoon's conception of poetry as an intertextual "hall of mirrors" in which other traditions, discourses and texts serve the Irish poet to confront and rethink his own cultural heritage and to situate it within pluralistic and transnational currents. As will be argued, the "gaze" of the intertextual Other, to borrow from Jacques Lacan, leads us here to a profoundly complexified portrait of the poet's identity. American modernist poets selected for the intertextual analysis in this part reveal the Irish poet's search for an interrogative, self-reflexive and ethically-engaged mode of writing which questions rigid conventions, inherited categories, postures and ideologies. The method adopted in the study involves close readings of Muldoon's poems against the selected pieces of Robert Frost, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. The choices are not accidental – the three highly idiosyncratic poets belong to the experimental strand of American modernism and offer diverse paradigms of critical inquiry into the poet's role vis-à-vis the crisis of unifying epistemological frameworks, revealing both the limits and potential of poetic answers to this crisis. The juxtapositions show that the Irish poet creatively absorbs, misreads and reworks the idioms of American modernists in search for an open, heteroglot and flexible form in which the self can be liberated from the grid of coherent narratives based on myths of origin, truth, authenticity, integrity, belonging and teleological development. Frost, whose influence Muldoon eagerly acknowledges, invites the poet to rethink the rigidity of binary categories between the self and the other, between the inside and the outside, the private and the public. The dialogic and ironic mode of Frost's poems creates a paradigm for a (self)critical distance towards any stable and authoritative positions, be it existential, political or ideological. Marianne Moore's animal poems, in turn, offer strategies of concealment, distortion, evasion and self-effacement which strongly resonate with Muldoon's own cryptic diction, reflexive of the poet's need to protect the self from the traps of overexposure and narrow definitions. And finally, the juxtaposition of Wallace Stevens' and Muldoon's elegiac poems take us to the problem of the poem at "the end of metaphysics". The analysis focuses on the poet's use of irony to probe the efficacy of traditional poetic forms in confrontation with loss and man's spiritual longings.

The thematic, conceptual and formal richness of Paul Muldoon's poetry can be only partially disclosed in the selective readings offered in the following volume. Based on the presented findings, however, there arises a broader question about the place and significance of the poet in the modern

literary tradition. The frequently heard lament over the increasingly shrinking audiences of poetry, along with the implied or openly articulated convictions that poetry no longer matters, returns when we are faced with the poet whose international persona and idiosyncratic idiom pose numerous problems with interpretation and categorization, leaving the reader lost in thick and palimpsestous textures woven out of determinately transnational and transgressive discourses and traditions. Mark Edmundson's resigned observation about the "decline of American poetry" well captures the spirit of the anxiety concerning the role of the poet today: "At a time when collective issues – communal issues, political issues – are pressing, poets have become ever more private, idiosyncratic, and withdrawn. Their poetry is not heard but overheard, and sometimes is too hermetic even to overhear with anything like comprehension" (2013). Indeed, in the world in which atomized individuals and societies are suffering from a "retrotopic" and "epidemic" nostalgia for a sense of coherence and collective (and often nationalist) identity (Bauman 2017: 3; Boym 2001: xvi), the role of the poet as the "unacknowledged legislator of the world" able to capture and communicate the condition of his age to the common reader comes again to the fore. In his article, Edmundson charges contemporary poets, including Paul Muldoon, with the lost capacity to "slake a reader's thirst for meanings that pass beyond the experience of the individual poet and light up the world we hold in common" (2013). As will be argued in the following essays, Edmundson's pessimistic diagnosis fails to do justice to the scope, uniqueness and diversity of Muldoon's poetic project. The Irish-American poet's chosen oscillation "between" cultures and traditions is one of the engines which fuel the openness of his vision and keep it free of solipsism. The power of his work as well as its attractiveness for the reader lie exactly in the poet's ability to formulate his positions in the tensions between the public and the private, the political and the personal, the national and transnational, the historical and universal, the obscure and the painfully articulate, the withdrawn and the disclosed. Although it actively interrogates individualistic, nationalistic and geopolitical longings for continuity and identity, his poetry does not offer any ready-made answers to the anxieties and problems raised by them; rather it asks us to continuously question our axiomatic stances and interrogate the nature as well as ethical significance of all our legacies and frameworks. The enigmatic forms often resisting the impatient and fetishistic reader invite renewed efforts of critical evaluation of the whole Western cultural heritage, along with the grand narratives, mytholo-

gies and (hi)stories informing our collective and personal self-image. The readings presented in this monograph hope to present Muldoon as a poet of inquiry – a poet-philosopher and nomad who dwells most productively in the dynamic mix and mash of available discourses and cultural environments. The poet’s nomadic consciousness, Socratic curiosity, “geopoetic” sensibility and transnational commitments are best realized in absorptive, generically complex and porous poetics which refuses to rest in comfortably unambiguous forms.

“What can I tell you? Though your quarry / lies exhausted at the bottom of an exhausted quarry, // to follow that lure / will almost certainly end in failure” (“Rune”, Muldoon 2001: 450), the poet seems to be sending a fair warning to the reader eager to pierce through the resisting surface of the poem’s idiom to solve the ultimate mystery of Muldoon’s “runic” inscriptions of the self and the world (note the playful rhyme of rune/Muldoon). And yet, the failure ultimately can be an illuminating lesson, as the poem ends with an urge for us to “go figure” (Muldoon 2001: 450), implying that, if we stop asking questions about our place in the world and ignore the multiple networks of relations, powers, memories and voices that shape our narratives of the self and the other, we will fail even more dismally as sensitive agents and curious interpreters of our own histories and realities.

The Authors
Poznań, July 11, 2017

References

- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2017. *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The future of nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Edmundson, Mark. 2013. “Poetry slam Or, The decline of American verse”. *Harper’s Magazine*. July 2013 (<https://harpers.org/archive/2013/07/poetry-slam/>) (Date of access: May 7, 2017).
- Jarniewicz, Jerzy. 2014. *In the shadow of foreign tongues: Essays on Irish poets*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Longley, Edna. 1994. *The leaving stream: Literature and revisionism in Ireland*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.
- Muldoon, Paul. 2001. *Poems 1968-1998*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.