

"ROCK" OF SAGES CLEFT FOR THEE: SONGS & SONNETS FROM PAUL MULDOON AND CORNELIUS EADY

Paul Muldoon. *Word on the Street*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013; and *Songs and Sonnets*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2013. Cornelius Eady, *Asking for the Moon*. New York: Red Glass Books, 2013; and *The Book of Hooks*, Cleveland Heights: Kattywompus Press, 2013.

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Speaking through Stephen Dedalus, Joyce assured us that at least one (and perhaps the most infamous) symbol of Irish art is the “cracked looking-glass of a servant.” In the hands of Paul Muldoon, the mirror has been further fractured—smashed, in fact, to pieces and reconstructed in mosaic fashion over an outdated political globe until the national borders it depicts are hidden by a reflective veneer. The result is something that more closely resembles a slick disco ball which Muldoon is content to hang above a new stage—most likely one in a smoke-free barroom—where the poet might be seen putting a new spin on an old image.

Once set in motion, St. Paul’s disco ball, like some twirling aspergillum, may well produce a complex and miraculous display: countless reflections of his own image sprinkled liberally onto the members of a predictable if not penitent congregation. With few exceptions, this audience will consist of academics. Kneeling in their own pew, they’ll struggle to follow a benediction they barely comprehend, but they’ll linger driven by their devotion to Muldoon’s reputation as a prolific, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, as much as by their curiosity about his newfound interest in rock and roll. If you look past the glitter, you’ll find that Joyce’s cracked looking-glass is still there. So is the servant. The question is who does he work for?

For those who haven’t heard, here’s the story: in September of 2000, Muldoon wrote a fan letter to rocker Warren Zevon. The next time Zevon was in New York, he phoned Muldoon to ask if the poet would like to meet the rocker. The poet would and did, and before long, he and the rocker were collaborating on two songs, “Macgillycuddy’s Reeks” and the title track of Zevon’s penultimate album *My Ride’s Here* (2002). Zevon’s final studio album, *The Wind*, was released just twelve days before he died in 2003 of terminal mesothelioma at the age of fifty-six. By then, however, if he hadn’t exactly passed the rock-idol torch to Muldoon, Zevon had at least tossed a good-sized chunk of encouragement onto the smoldering turf of Muldoon’s quiet aspirations.

As Muldoon's wife, novelist Jean Hanff Korelitz, puts it "when a 40-something-year-old man comes home with an electric guitar, what is any self-respecting wife to believe? You say something noncommittal and wait for it to go away. He fell in with some really passionate music people. They had things to say and language and music to say it with." First came Racket, the short-lived, so-called "three-car garage band" Muldoon put together in 2004 with Nigel Smith, a professor of 17th-century poetry at Princeton who plays bass guitar. Wayside Shrines followed in 2010 and has just released *The Word on the Street*, its first CD, on the Case Records label. Muldoon's eponymously titled tie-in consisting of thirty-two lyrics—thirteen of which appear as songs on the CD—was published simultaneously by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The introduction to the FSG version of *The Word on the Street* (which has all the earmarks of having been written by Muldoon himself) informs the reader that the poet is revisiting the essential meaning of the term "lyric" and that the lyrics in the book were written for music performed by Way-side Shrines, described, incidentally, in the introduction as a "rock band," though one would be wise to insert either "soft" or "adult" before that first word prior to listening. According to the introduction, the lyrics explore "the classic themes of song: lost love, lost wars, Charlton Heston, barbed wire, pole dancers, cellulite, Hegel, elephants, Oedipus, more barbed wire, Buddy Holly, Jersey peaches, Julius Caesar, Trenton, cockatoos, and the Younger Brothers (Bob and John and Jim and Cole)."

Muldoon is a master of this sort of quipping, and he is at his best when he stays true to the function of poetry rather than using it as a ladle for dipping into the well of agitprop. In lyrics like those of "Azerbaijan," "Badass Blues," and "Big Twist," Muldoon is happy to allow readers to engage with the poetry on their own; he allows imagery and metaphor to do their jobs. This tactic is quite evident in "Elephant Anthem" in which Muldoon writes

The elephants have done a bunk
 They've left on the late train
 For when it comes to packing trunks
 They're speedy in the main
 And when it comes to skipping town
 The elephants have got it down
 To a fine art
 They too refuse to act their age
 And when they go on a rampage
 They're off the chart
 They still rely quite heavily on scent
 For figuring out what it all meant

It's obvious that in these lyrics elephant = Republican, but Muldoon doesn't feel compelled to explain. However, in "So Long," Muldoon can't help himself, and poet becomes proselytizer.

So long as you think Obama
 Is an abomination
 The first season of *St. Elsewhere*
 Not worthy of devotion
 Over takeout egg foo yong
 So long as you think Genghis Khan
 Isn't your next of kin
 And Maestro Itzhak Perlman
 Should lose his violin
 I'll be saying so long.

It's a fair bet that Muldoon wrote the above lyrics before he wrote "For Barack Obama: His Second Inauguration," a long poem in which Muldoon admits unabashedly his profound admiration for and trust in the president, but also reveals a willingness to entertain the possibility that perhaps the POTUS is not a portent of Parousia. When Muldoon writes "now I've voted twice for you / because I think you're mostly true / to your word," it's encouraging (judging from his inclusion of the operative word "mostly") to see that he is willing to do what is perhaps the poet's most important duty: remain objective, if not outright skeptical, when it comes to sizing up so-called authority. True, one poet's authoritarian is another's hero (look no further than Pound for proof), but it's apparent that it's becoming less fashionable for poets to question political pretenders; unless, of course, the perpetrator is an obvious and easy target—paging W.—but who needs perspicacity for that? It's another thing entirely to recognize the same failures in one's political pin-up and indict him regardless of your faith in him. At least—and at last—Muldoon indicates in this poem that he is aware of the inconsistency in himself.

Yes, he urges Obama (ominously, in my opinion) not to shy away from using strong-arm tactics to defeat "a faction / that's up mostly for shutting something down." And yes, he advises the president to "put the boot in" so as to intimidate those who would employ the system of checks and balances in an effort to prevent the reduction of the democratic process to a mere executive order. But Muldoon himself seems at last willing to put his own boot into the mix—even if it means being critical of someone "for whom [he has] so much more time / than almost any of the dime- / a-dozen politicians / we track by their shifting positions / as targets may be tracked by drones." There's another operative (and ominous) word.

Muldoon then goes on to advise Obama on a brief litany of unresolved concerns (failures?) including drone strikes, kill lists, torture, political opacity, economic collapse, etcetera, but this counsel never becomes indictment. He takes aim at the NRA, but gives the NDAA a pass. So in spite of his tentative criticism of the current administration, Muldoon is still content to take a quiet seat in the boat after rocking it ever so slightly. This is where he may lose much of the audience he *hopes* to court when he comes calling in his rock and roll clothes.

It's not surprising. After all, Muldoon's is not rock music in the vein of other overtly political bands like Ministry, KORN, or Megadeth, all of whom rely on a heavier, more intimidating sound to sell a message of mistrust. Furthermore, while Muldoon's lyrics sometimes drift into a rollicking Belfast rap, they're not intended to come close to anything Lupe Fiasco or Professor Griff ever ranted about, either—quite the converse is true. This is rock that comes pretty close to the kind of music bands like Sixpence None the Richer or Camper Van Beethoven have made over the years. There's certainly nothing wrong with that; just don't expect Wayside Shrines to produce an "N.W.O." of their own anytime soon.

Then again, Al Jourgensen will almost certainly never write a book like Muldoon's *Songs and Sonnets*, also published earlier this year by Enitharmon Press. Muldoon continues to display his current obsession with the intersection of poetry and music; with *Songs and Sonnets* it may even be evident in the book's format. Until the advent of the CD, rock and roll records, whether singles or LPs, were formatted with two sides: A and B. Typically, A sides were reserved for potential "hits," songs that artists or their labels considered more worthy of initial promotional efforts than their B-side counterparts. Side B was the domain of songs that were judged to have less immediate appeal, frequently because they required more attention from the listener before they caught on with the artist's target audience.

In *Songs and Sonnets*, Muldoon has arranged the poems into two very distinct forms. In general terms, the word "song" is defined as "a short poem or other set of words set to music or meant to be sung." "Sonnet," on the other hand, has a much more complicated definition; the form is highly artificial, and was created for a purpose that was fundamentally opposed to that of the song. Invented in the thirteenth century by the Sicilian troubadour Giacomo da Lentini, the sonnet—a word that translates as "little sound"—was, as Charles Simic reminds us, "a new kind of lyric poem, one not supposed to be sung and accompanied by a musical instrument, but meant to be read silently to oneself." In the introduction to the *Penguin Book of the Sonnet*, Phyllis Levine elaborates on this concept when she writes

that “independence from musical performance freed the sonnet to exist as a self-sufficient microcosm, inviting a reader to follow its maze of meaning and sound at whatever pace one preferred.” Muldoon invites his audience to join him in celebrating the very nature of the sonnet. As if they were tracks on the B side of a record, he asks readers to spend more time with his sonnets than with the songs in this book.

Undoubtedly, Muldoon is aware that the reader will already be acquainted with the obvious connection between his *Songs and Sonnets* and the other famous book by that name written and published posthumously by John Donne, a poet Muldoon often cites as an influence. Donne, the reader may recall, was the subject of a critical study by Muldoon published in 2012. Unlike many of Donne’s “sonnets”—which are short, hybridized, sonnet-like love lyrics—Muldoon’s are content to conform to Da Lentini’s original fourteen-line construction, lending further credence to the notion that Muldoon may have intended his sonnets to be read in the traditional manner: in quiet contemplation, albeit surrounded by a cacophony of song.

To test this theory we might look at a grouping of four poems appearing more or less at the center of the collection: “It Won’t Be Anytime Soon,” “A Dent,” “Le Flanneur,” and “3-Car Garage.” The first and last of this group are songs, while the middle two are sonnets. “It Won’t Be Anytime Soon” is a boisterous, three-verse lament in a cadence typical of Muldoon. Like an existential field-holler, the “song” speaks of unrequited necessity in a manic, though mournful call and response:

I need a man with enough sagacity
 To wear a coonskin cap
 And escort me and my party
 Through the Cumberland Gap
 A man sufficiently rough hewn
 Not to see shooting a raccoon
 As serious crime
You need a man with enough powder and ball
To see that what lies behind a waterfall's
The American sublime
Though you may one day track down your Daniel Boone
It won't be anytime soon.

The left-most panel in this tetraptych is “3-Car Garage,” a nod to Muldoon’s self-effacing appraisal of his gentrified dabbling in rock and roll. This song, like the previous one, is all sound and hyperbolic fury:

We got the Camry on the road
 My old lady and I
 I thought I'd asked her to download
Spirit in the Sky
 We were feeling kinda flaccid
 When we hit 202
 We dropped some amino acid
 Like ancient hippies do
 By the time we got to Woodstock
 It was time for a massage
 It may be garage rock
 But it's a 3-car garage.

Sandwiched, oddly, between these two raucous songs are two quiet sonnets, “The Dent” and “The Flaneur.” Both are Irish reveries. The latter, true its title, seems to be a colorful, strolling analysis of Dublin’s apparent resistance to change. In this view of Dublin, there are still “spirit grocers,” curates addicted to horse-racing, and pubs where the odd sentimental ballad might still be sung. And though the illusion of time at a standstill tempts Muldoon to believe himself to be untouched by it as well—and perhaps inspires him to strap on a Stratocaster and play the youthful rock star—there are any number of late Irish sages ready to remind him otherwise:

It was never a pint of plain in a jug
 had the plain people of Ireland by the jugular.

Now the girl on whom you used to dote
 is in her dotage.
 The Evening *Herald* is less than heraldic.

Though your flesh may not at first look gross
 in the window of a spirit grocer’s
 you can still rely on Myles for a reality check.

That’s Myles na gCopaleen, a.k.a. Flann “A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN” O’Brien, in case you wondered. Perhaps part of O’Brien’s reality check to Muldoon should have been—then again, perhaps part of it was—that “the majority of the members of the Irish parliament are professional politicians, in the sense that otherwise they would not be given jobs minding mice at crossroads.” For “Irish parliament” one would do well to read “members of any governing body”; furthermore, if Muldoon were to have responded to Myles in song rather than sonnet, it’s unlikely that he would have produced anything like “We Want Blood.” That song is a true

rocking Irish indictment of “politics as usual” by the most apparent contemporary heir to An tUasal na gCopaleen; i.e., one Stefan Murphy, lyricist and front man for Dublin’s own The Mighty Stef.

But let’s not forget that Muldoon is a better poet than rock star. This is made eminently clear in the second sonnet in our imaginary tetraptych which, for my money, is the heart of the book. “The Dent” is a cleverly hidden-in-plain-sight elegy to Michael Allen, Muldoon’s one-time teacher and mentor who passed away in 2011. This particular sonnet is perhaps the quietest moment in either book by Muldoon featured in this review. It is by turns pastoral, philosophical, tender, nostalgic, and moving. It is a touching tribute to a man who was an important presence at the heart of the literary life of Northern Ireland. Not only was Allen a central figure in the Belfast “group” of poets in the mid-1960s, but the list of poets he influenced with his skill and willingness to serve as a kind of cultural link between rural, old, and traditional Ireland and the urban, new, and progressive Celtic Tiger reads like a who’s who of Irish letters: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, and Paul Muldoon. Muldoon, of course, and as usual, focuses on the most colorful details of his subject’s life to deliver an elegiac masterpiece. In my opinion, the “dent” in question gives Joyce’s enduring symbol of Irish art a real run for the money:

The depth of a dent in the flank of your grandfather’s cow
from his having leaned his brow
against it morning and night

for twenty years of milking by hand
gave but little sense of how distant is the land
on which you had us set our sights.

I’m not quite sure why so many people who gain celebrity as writers, actors, athletes, etcetera, convince themselves that a) they ought to add; and b) they are capable of adding “rock star” to the list of their accomplishments. Perhaps it’s simply a case of their reaching a point of relative comfort in life that allows for a certain degree of playing out their fantasies without any real danger of losing their positions, possessions, or plenary powers. While there may be some reciprocal crossover—rock star to respected writer, for instance—this is a markedly scarce phenomenon. Nick Cave comes to mind, but only because the man is a true polymath who *can* actually write. But let’s be clear: we should not convince ourselves that “the talent of the room” is limited to poets and writers. There are other rooms that require just as much talent, and it’s very difficult to fake the kind of talent such rooms demand.

In his recent collection of song lyrics, *Asking for the Moon*, published by Red Glass Books as a chapbook accompanied by a CD containing recorded musical versions of the poems slash lyrics, Cornelius Eady informs the reader that running parallel to his career as respected poet is a “strange pattern” he has followed, one that has caused him to dub himself “an invisible musician.” This strange pattern has been responsible for Eady’s publishing no fewer than three collections of poetry slash lyrics with musical “bonus CDs.” To help position himself in a musical arena, Eady points to his membership in a “rock band” (in actuality, it was an “oldies band”) in Rochester, New York way back in the ’70s. Though none of the lyrics in *Asking for the Moon* date back to the 1970s, half of them come from the early ’90s when Eady took a job teaching at the University of Alabama. He explains that the best part of the job was that he “was given a big house to live in a mile or so from campus, with no neighbors around”; apparently, the setting was conducive to pursuing his musical aspirations, and he began to write songs in earnest. The title song seems to echo Eady’s incredulity at having found “a place for [his] songs to land”:

I want something to eat,
 Shoes on my feet,
 Take my eyes from the floor.
 I want some smarts in my head
 A roof and a bed,
 Cold cash and a lock on the door.

Is this asking for the moon?

It may not be asking for the moon, but it certainly smacks of asking for a day job that allows for a lot of time to fantasize in relative comfort. The other half of the songs in *Asking for the Moon* were written between 2010 and 2012, and here the tone seems to show the wear and tear of more than twenty years of working in academe:

My name, they say, is a man beloved,
 A man with a printed history.
 Here I sit, and here they try
 To read it back to me.
 What's this accusation?
 The hell is poetry?

Much of poetry is simply allowing the inherent music of language, image, and metaphor to combine in a heady mix for the purpose of creating mean-

ing in the mind of the reader. But Eady likes to explain. He tells us in a gloss to this poem, which by the way is called “A Poet Forgets His Library,” that it was written in response to his having learned that the poet and activist Jack Agueros had begun to suffer the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. A diligent reader might have enjoyed piecing together the disparate elements of Eady’s poetry to arrive at a satisfying interpretation, but as no one is allowed to spend much time lost and searching for clues in the space of this poem, the jig is up when its author spills the beans.

In his newest collection, *The Book of Hooks*—a two-chapbook, two-CD affair—Eady displays his acumen for producing fine imagery, and he just may well give the reader an enduring symbol of African-American art when he writes “Something in his pocket / wonder what he hid?” The line comes from the first poem in Vol. 2 called “Walking (While Black),” a poem that attempts to make sense of the circumstances surrounding the Trayvon Martin shooting and other incidents like it while doing something more. Eady uses the above image to great effect in *The Book of Hooks*, but he also tends to use it somewhat sparingly. Preferring to work past the limits of the pathetic fallacy of ethnic destiny to embrace more universally human concerns, Eady is not above showing exactly what he has in his pocket; and often, when he opens his hand, the reader will find he’s holding poems written by others—Meg Kearney, Mary Molyneaux, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example. Eady justifies their inclusion in his book almost matter-of-factly: by virtue of his having set them to music of his own composition, recorded versions of which the listener will find on the accompanying CD. Some may find this an unsettling practice, but Eady is certainly not one to slavishly conform to tradition. Take, for instance, his inclusion in Vol. 1 of Millay’s very conventional sonnet “Heart, Have No Pity” which is an admonition to those who would preserve tradition at the cost of pleasure and innovation: “Heart, have no pity on this house of bone: / Shake it with dancing, break it down with joy.” Unlike Muldoon, Eady breaks with custom and sets this sonnet to music; then he raps each line of it, seemingly out of deference to its message.

But once again, despite his willingness to break the rules, Eady can be found explaining himself in an endnote. In many of these glosses, Eady’s tone is almost apologetic. He frequently sounds like a precocious school boy caught scribbling in his primer:

Sometime in the early 90’s [sic] I was awarded a small grant for a residency at the Millay Colony in Upstate New York...[I] spent my month there—...as part of the terms of the grant—setting a group of poems written by other poets to music...As source material, I would use whatever poetry books were around in

the Colony's library, and I started with this sonnet of Millay's...since of course, it was her joint.

Eady offers similar explanations after each poem in this collection, though they're significantly more detailed than the edited one above. This is another rather unsettling practice that some readers may find annoying. Halfway through Vol. 1, the reader may begin to wonder why the poet isn't content to let the poetry speak for itself. I can't find a good reason for all the explanations except to say that perhaps Eady doesn't trust the effectiveness of his own hooks in this book. It's a mystery why this should be, especially when there are plenty of very good hooks; for example,

I don't know where I've been
 Don't care where I'm bound
 Might be a wingless angel
 Might be a fish that drowned

(from "Fish"), or

This is the way the real life goes
 A coffee cup, a mailbox filled with bills.
 This is the real life, heaven knows,
 Holes in your socks, and a
 Secret war of wills

(from "The Old Married Couple").

There may be something to the suggestion that a poet may be driven to become an apologist by the lack of faith he has in his own work. It is no great mystery that even the most stand-alone lyrics are dependent upon their musical accompaniment. Eady's recent lyrics, for instance, tend to lack the sheer poetic independence of his poetry—that found in *The Gathering of My Name*, *Brutal Imagination*, or *Hardheaded Weather*, for instance. To that end, even many of the lyrics in the very recent *Asking for the Moon* are more poetically satisfying than a number of the sets found in *The Book of Hooks*. Take, for instance, "Rosin Up Your Bow / No More Blues Blues" which contains the lines

She pushes the windows open
 After a stormy night.
 She was a cork in a hurricane,
 A sparrow falling in hard rain,
 Now she starts to grin, the room she's in
 Is honeyed with light.

Wonderful. Beautiful, even. And yet, Eady follows such timid beauty with an elucidation that is as long as the poem itself. The effect is like shining a carbon arc lamp's 1000 watts of obnoxiousness on two lovers previously lit only by crepuscular rays of moonlight.

If, like Muldoon, Eady hopes to relive a dream and appeal to a "rock" audience, he'd better stop explaining. A rock audience will listen to maybe half an elucidation before it takes his explanation for an apology. He'll lose their allegiance before he ever has it in his corner.

In the end, my caveat to Eady's readers is to take the advice David Jones offered his own with regard to the notes he supplied to *The Anathemata*; namely, "I ask the reader, *when actually engaged upon the text*, to consult these glosses mainly or only on points of pronunciation. For other purposes they should be read separately." While it's my opinion that Eady's glosses serve an entirely different purpose than Jones's—you won't find any need to elicit Eady's help with pronouncing difficult Welsh words, for instance—the spirit of Jones's suggestion for dealing with copious notes accompanying poetry is helpful nonetheless in this case: read them separately. Beyond that, I would suggest taking Walter Pater at his word and let Mr. Eady's poetry aspire to the condition of the music to which he so desperately wants it to aspire. In other words, just listen. And don't be fooled by his suggestion that what you're hearing is rock and roll. It's not. It's more in the vein of Taj Mahal when he's at his metaphysical best, Keb' Mo' when he's most squarely located at the crossroads of tradition and innovation, or Eric Bibb when he's at his most soulfully transcendent. Nothing wrong with that—nothing at all.

Rock and roll is a fickle and jealous master, despite the attraction to the seeming freedom it offers its practitioners. What it values most is authenticity. It's suspicious of the Ivory Tower—and not without good reason. The Tower has a well-earned reputation of guarding itself against the anarcho-individualism valued by rock and roll. Perhaps rock and roll's mistrust of academe is even more pronounced now that the Tower sports a mirrored glass façade, has disabled the drawbridge, and filled in the moat all in a gesture that it hopes screams DIVERSITY! If academe is interested in forging an alliance with the streets, then rock and roll wants to know why. And that's a good move because it's wise to ask this question; after all, it wasn't until after poetry became intimately associated with academe that it lost its venom. Call it paranoid, but rock and roll still does what poetry once claimed it could and ought to do. Rock and roll has nothing to lose: no tenure, no reputation, no three-car garage. It values credentials of a different sort: devotion to liberty, defiance of hollow authority, musicianship, showmanship,

and the tenacity to perfect all of the above through willful struggle. After all, it's the experience of paying the infamous "dues" and a genuine rocker's willingness to do so that will earn him the respect of his peers. Convincing a rock and roll audience that it should take you seriously is a bit like standing up to a bully and trying to defeat him with intimidation rather than action. The bully probably won't be convinced of your ruse if you haven't had at least one successful knock-down-drag-out fight.